

3

Strawberry Panic

Sakurako Kimino
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lightnovel



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*Eheheh... I'm a little
embarrassed...*

June Seasonal Uniforms



Summer has arrived on Astrea Hill, and with it, the change into seasonal summer uniforms. Nagisa's summer uniform was delivered to her room, so she invited her friends to see her try it on. Everyone complimented Nagisa, making her blush.



*Today, we fight
the final battle!*

November School Festival



The most popular event in the Tri-School Festival is the play performed by Strawberry Dorm residents. In addition to Shizuma and Amare, the three school presidents also appear, bringing the play to its climax. What will be the outcome of the “final battle” between the Five Stars...?!

*Holy Mother, please
bless my little angels...*



December Christmas Eve



A holy night. After the party, Santa Chikaru and her little helper appear. Chikaru seems to be leaving gifts in the rooms of the underclassmen. Kizuna and the girls sleep as Oneesama lovingly watches over them.

Lovers Drawn to Each Other

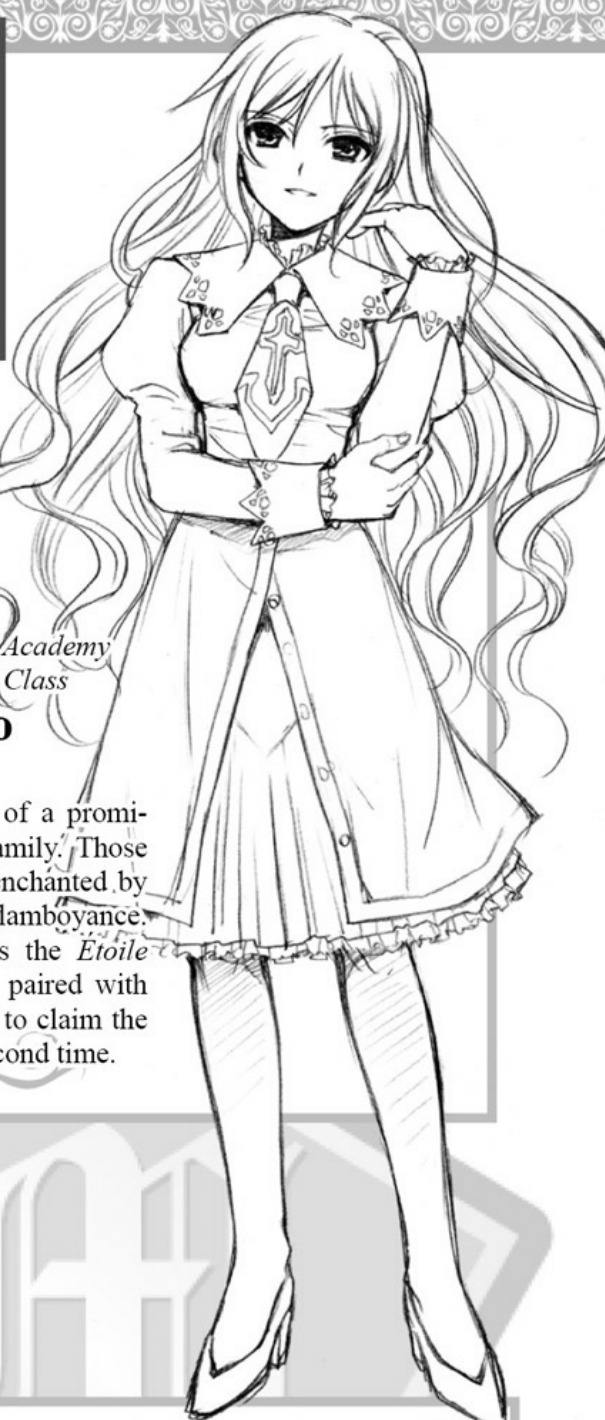
The *Étoile* competition is held to find the best couple out of the three Astraea schools. We will introduce the favored lovely couples of this contest: Nagisa and Shizuma, and Hikari and Amane.

Hanazono Shizuma

*St. Miator Girls' Academy
Sixth Year; Snow Class*

Hanazono Shizuma

Eldest daughter of a prominent Japanese family. Those around her are enchanted by her beauty and flamboyance. Though she was the *Étoile* last year, she is paired with Nagisa this year to claim the crown for the second time.



*St. Miator Girls' Academy
Fourth Year; Moon Class*

Aoi Nagisa

A newly transferred Fourth Year Student to St. Miator Girls' Academy. She has been Shizuma's object of desire since her first day at school, and before she could even acclimate herself in this prestigious all-girl school, she was pulled into the *Étoile* Competition.

Aoi Nagisa

Precious Friends



St. Miator Girls' Academy - Fourth Year, Moon Class

Suzumi Tamao

Nagisa's classmate and roommate who has a crush on Nagisa.

St. Miator Girls' Academy - First Year, Flower Class

Tsukidate Chiyo

An underclassman who adores Nagisa. A well-mannered and modest young lady.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year, Class Un

Nanto Yaya

Hikari's classmate and roommate. Strongly desires Hikari.

St. Spica Girls' Institute - First Year, Class Deux

Okuwaka Tsubomi

Surefooted Student Council Secretary. Always full of energy.



St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year, Class B

Hyuga Kizuna

Innocent girl who loves sweets and Chikaru-sama.

St. Lulim Girls' School - Second Year, Class B

Natsume Remon

Kizuna's classmate and member of Chikaru's Costume Club.



St. Lulim Girls' School - First Year, Class C

Byakudan Kagome

Childish and always carries a teddy bear.

Konohana Hikari

St. Spica Girls' Institute - Third Year, Class Un

Konohana Hikari

A quiet, timid girl, newly transferred to Spica. She and Amane, the campus star, are in love with each other.



St. Spica Girls' Institute - Fifth Year, Class Trois

Otori Amane

The leader of the "Five Great Stars" of the school, and called the "Prince." She entered the Étoile Competition with Hikari to fulfill the expectations of the fellow students.

Otori Amane

*St. Miator Girls' Academy's
Student Council President*

Rokujo Miyuki

Fifth Year, Flower Class. Daughter of an old, well-established family. A strategist, known as the "Princess of Rokujo-in." Rumored to have the ability to control evil spirits.



Rokujo Miyuki

*St. Spica Girls' Institute's
Student Council President*

Tomori Shion

Fifth Year Spica student known as the "Snow Queen." Very intelligent, but unlike her nickname, can become quite heated at times.



Tomori Shion

*St. Lulim Girls' School's
Student Council President*

Minamoto Chikaru

St. Lulim Girls' School Fifth Year, Class A. Has a graceful demeanor, but is a definite go-getter. Known as the "Shadow Empress"...



Minamoto Chikaru

The Beautiful Campus Leaders

Here we will introduce the student council presidents who bring together all three schools. They are highly respected and admired model students gifted with both intelligence and beauty. Each beautiful campus leader strives to have their chosen couple claim the Étoile crown for their school!

*St. Spica Girls'
Institute - Fifth
Year, Class Trois*

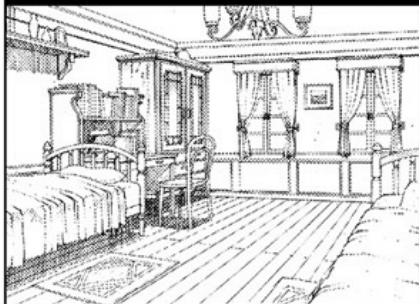
Kusanagi Makoto

Violinist who studied abroad in Russia after graduating Spica Elementary. Came back to Japan to return glory to Spica. Hates the Amane-Hikari couple.



Kusanagi Makoto

Astraea Hall (Strawberry Dorms)



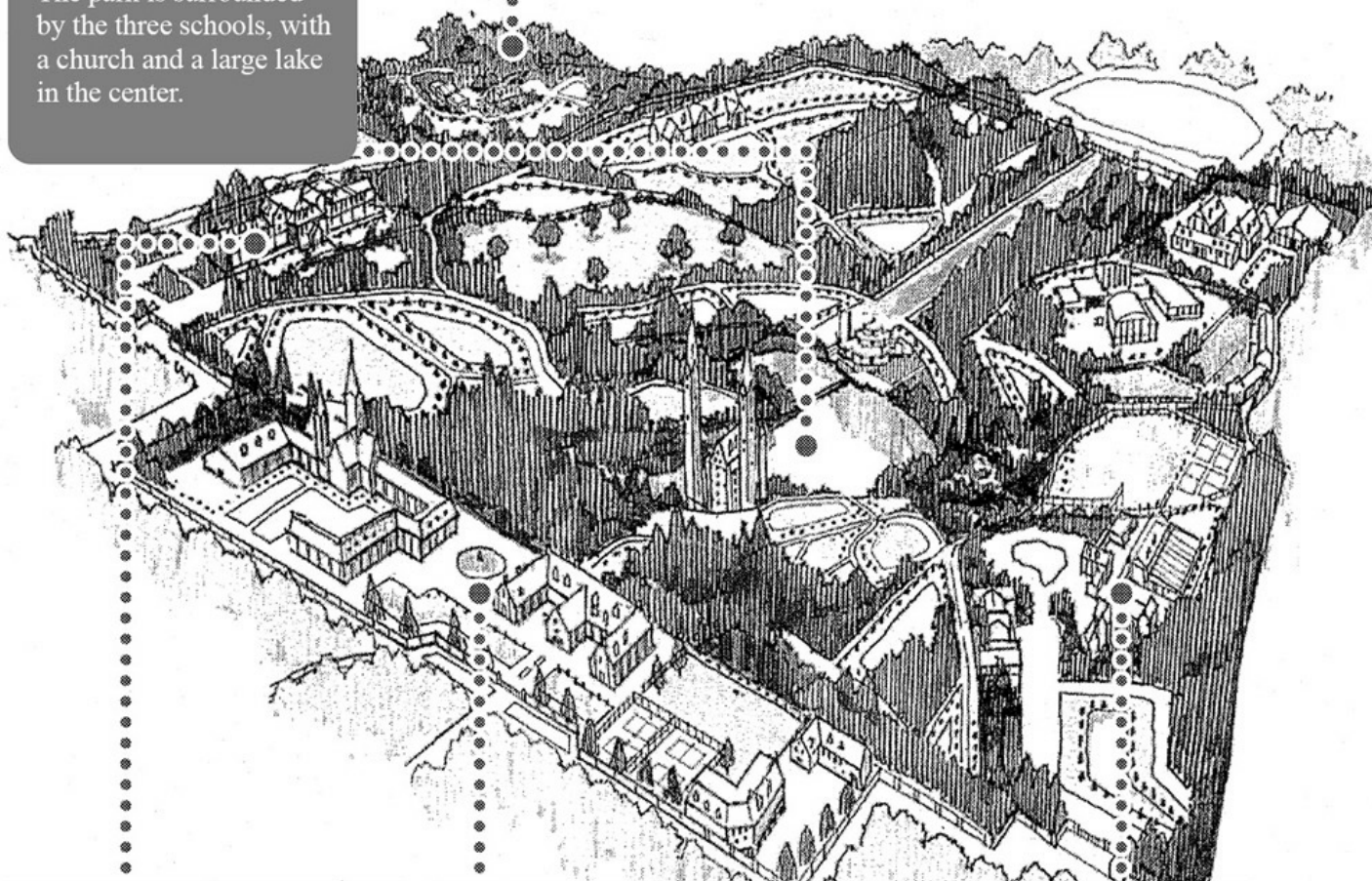
The dorm where Nagisa, Shizuma, and others live. Three buildings, one for each school, are arranged in a triangle.

Diagram of Astraea Hill

Here we introduce the facilities and other locations where the blessed young ladies enjoy their campus life. On Astraea Hill, there are the three all-girl schools, a dormitory, a garden, and a convent, which are isolated from the world.

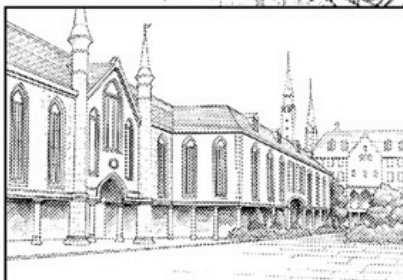
Maiden Park

The park is surrounded by the three schools, with a church and a large lake in the center.



St. Lulim Girls' School

A free, relaxed school with many interesting clubs. The building has a homey air to it and sits closest to the Strawberry Dorms.



St. Miator Girls' Academy

The oldest school, with its British architecture, has the strictest educational standards.



St. Spica Girls' Institute

This school emphasizes the development of women who will advance in society. Well-built facilities with horseback riding grounds and an indoor pool.

STRAWBERRY PANIC VOLUME 3

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Edited by ASCII MEDIA WORKS.

First published in Japan in 2006 by Media Works Inc., Tokyo, Japan.

English translation rights arranged with ASCII MEDIA WORKS.

Translation: Anastasia Moreno

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Publisher: Jason DeAngelis

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Ebook Edition: December 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Strawberry Panic

VOLUME 3

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SEVEN SEAS' COMMITMENT TO TRANSLATION AUTHENTICITY

JAPANESE NAME ORDER

To ensure maximum authenticity in Seven Seas' translation of *Strawberry Panic: Volume 3*, all character names have been kept in their original Japanese name order with family name first and given name second. For copyright reasons, creator names appear in standard English name order.

HONORIFICS

In addition to preserving the original Japanese name order, Seven Seas is committed to ensuring that honorifics—polite speech that indicates a person's status or relationship towards another individual—are retained within this book. Politeness is an integral facet of Japanese culture and we believe that maintaining honorifics in our translations helps bring out the same character nuances as seen in the original work.

The following are some of the more common honorifics you may come across while reading this and other books: **-san**— The most common of all honorifics, it is an all-purpose suffix that can be used in any situation where politeness is expected. Generally seen as the equivalent to Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., *etc.*

-sama— This suffix is one level higher than “-san” and is used to confer great respect upon an individual.

-kun— This suffix is commonly used at the end of boys' names to express either familiarity or endearment. It can also be used when addressing someone younger than oneself or of a lower status.

-chan— Another common honorific. This suffix is mainly used to express endearment towards girls, but can also be used when referring to little boys or even pets. Couples are also known to use the term between one another to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy.

Senpai— This title is used towards one's senior or “superior” in a particular group or organization. “Senpai” is most often used in a school setting, where underclassmen refer to upperclassmen as “senpai,” though it is also commonly

said by employees when addressing fellow employees who hold seniority in the workplace. (Note: “Sempai” is sometimes used as an alternate spelling.)

Kouhai– This is the exact opposite of “senpai,” and is used to refer to underclassmen in school, junior employees at the workplace, *etc.*

Sensei– Literally meaning “one who has come before,” this title is used for teachers, doctors, or masters of any profession or art.

Oniisan– This title literally means “big brother.” First and foremost, it is used by younger siblings towards older male siblings. It can be used by itself or attached to a person’s name as a suffix (-niisan). It is often used by a younger person toward an older person unrelated by blood, in this case as a sign of respect. Other forms include the informal “oniichan” and the more respectful “oniisama.”

Oneesan– This title is the opposite of “Oniisan” and means “big sister.” Other forms include the informal “oneechan” and the more respectful “oneesama.”

French Guide

Aînée: Older sister *Cadette*: Younger sister *Étoile*: Star *Examen sur l'Astraea*: Exam about Astraea *Galette*: A type of crêpe, a pancake-like pastry *Garçon*: Waiter *Le Dernier Miracle*: The final miracle *L'Épreuve d'amour*: The test of love *L'Ouverture brillante*: The brilliant overture (beginning) *Petite couronne*: Small crown *Trois Lumières*: Three lights

Prologue

The Midsummer Winds Attract Worrisome Dreams

T*hump, thump, thump, thump...*

Nagisa's heart fluttered anxiously. The fingers of her tightly clenched fists pressed together as a light breeze slid across her stomach. It felt as if something precious was slipping through her pale, dry fingertips like sand, and she gripped her hand even tighter.

Oh gosh...Am I...Am I doing something completely outrageous...?

Nagisa grew nervous, picking up her pace as she cut through Maiden Park toward the Strawberry Dorms.

I never left class early, or the school, for that matter. I also never felt this anxious until today. It's so nerve-wracking...

No, it's different.

It wasn't nervousness that tormented Nagisa, but pain, sorrow, and uncertainty. Frustration.

No, I've made up my mind...I made my decision the moment I declared my withdrawal from the competition. And I don't want to admit that I regret it already. There was nothing else I could do. It couldn't be helped.

Nagisa shuffled faster. Her confusion was so great that she couldn't think of anything else to do but stare blankly at a small point of empty air ahead of her while she continued her steps along the slightly overgrown path. She pushed through the wind, defying its resistance, and forged ahead. The dark green cuffs of her Miator uniform fluttered violently.

This turbulence describes my feelings perfectly, Nagisa thought with a wry smile, but when she looked at the sky, like a daydream, she was called back into

that memory.

It had been a windy day, like today, and the wind scattered the cherry blossoms across Astream Hill. Nagisa was lost, and suddenly a goddess appeared, standing proud—she was so beautiful and divine. The goddess seemed fearless and untouchable.

Back then, I didn't know who she was—it was our first encounter. I asked her for directions. The first time I laid eyes on her, from that moment on... I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Yes, ever since then a part of my heart has belonged to her.

I wonder: why was I so obsessed with Shizuma-oneesama? It wasn't a matter of whether I liked her or not, I was just captivated by her beauty. The first time I saw her, I was in awe. I gasped because I never imagined that a girl could be so beautiful.

And on top of that, I couldn't believe such a beautiful girl paid attention to me. Hard to believe now, but it's true.

Nagisa shook her head, pushing the memories away. *I was being toyed with, but I couldn't resist. I was at her mercy. And before I knew it, I did something I shouldn't have done.*

I got so scared that I let go.

Nagisa stopped and looked at her hands. Her palms were coated in sweat. She had been lost in her thoughts and walking at such a heavy pace that she had run out of breath and was sweating profusely.

Finally she saw the front gate of the Strawberry Dorms. It was unusually quiet and vacant. Nagisa had it all to herself. She was half-relieved Shizuma wasn't there, especially since Nagisa had withdrawn from the competition, but also half-disappointed as well. That was the story of their relationship. She always wanted to be with Shizuma, yet at the same time didn't want to be with her. Because she liked Shizuma, and at the same time was afraid of her. No, that wasn't it. Nagisa liked Shizuma so much that she was *afraid* to be with her—a feeling she had never felt before.

She didn't even recognize the feeling...it was love.

With mixed emotions, she clutched her traditional Miator leather school bag—a little heavy for a young girl—and entered the gate. For a brief moment, the memory of Shizuma guiding her to this dorm on her first day of school flashed through her mind. The memory was enchanting, like a magic spell.

And like a curse, it would not let her go.

Chapter 1

The Escapees Walk Down a

White Path at High Noon

Growing excitement and anticipation stirred in one of the buildings on campus—Miator’s Koubu Hall. The second round of the *Étoile* competition—which determined the best couple to represent the three prestigious all-girl schools—had been held here.

And the winners were about to be announced.

The students, usually so prim and proper, chattered with excitement, but the announcement broke through the clamor.

“Everyone, we ask for your attention. We would like to make an announcement. The winning couple of the second round of this year’s *Étoile* competition is...”

The crowd fell silent.

“...Kusanagi Makoto, from St. Spica Girls’ Institute, and Byakudan Kagome, from St. Lulim Girls’ School!”

The crowd broke into wild cheers.

“Wooooow!”

“Those two?”

“I knew they would win.”

“That’s great”

“What a wonderful surprise.”

Praises filled the hall as students showed their approval. But beneath the compliments, voices of criticism could also be heard.

“I can’t believe this... What a scam.” In the back row of the bleachers, Kenjo Kaname leaned against the wall, staring at Makoto as she raised her hand in victory.

Beside Kaname stood Kiyashiki Momomi, who covered her mouth with a

folding fan and snickered, “You’re ticked off...yet again.” She turned to Kaname and smiled. “You’re such a sourpuss, Kaname. Just think, with Prince Amanesama eliminated from this round, this outcome was predictable, wasn’t it? Of course, even I’m surprised that Shizuma-oneesama dropped out, but she never should have participated in the first place.”

With no response from Kaname, Momomi sighed and continued to share her thoughts with the little panda on her folding fan. “I’m really sad that Amanesama was disqualified, but all things considered, even if the partner is from Lulim, I hope Makoto wins for Spica’s sake.”

“Did you say ‘Makoto’?! Since when did you get so intimate with her to call her by her first name!” Kaname jerked her head around to look at Momomi, flames burning in her eyes.

“Oooh, you’re soo scary. Gee, you almost make me sound like a traitor or something.” Momomi patted Kaname’s shoulder. “Of course I wanted to see Amanesama have a glorious victory. She would have shone as the stunning white prince. But, you know, we can’t wish for that anymore.”

Because the damage has been done.

Momomi shrugged, as if giving up, and pointed to the group on stage. She bit her lip, as if she was trying to hold herself back, and continued. “Besides, I don’t think Makoto is a bad girl at heart. Sure, she comes off as stubborn and rebellious, but she seems to be upfront, with no evil intentions. I mean, even though she sounds really rebellious and all, she didn’t trick Amanesama or anything. She says a lot of things bluntly, but she doesn’t seem to be tricky or anything. I think she’s upfront and honest. I mean, think about it. If Princess Rokujo and the Miator Student Council were behind this, they would have planned a lot of underhanded scheming to take down Amanesama, you know —”

Kaname interrupted. “But Miator forced their way into the competition at the last minute. You know the Miator Student Council was behind Shizumasama’s sudden jump into the competition. But I don’t think they had any secret plans —”

Momomi interjected, “Oh my gosh! Hey, Kaname, do you remember? Who

was the first person who recommended Makoto's transfer to Spica? And who gained the most from Makoto's victory in this round? I also heard that Shizuma-sama's participation was a complete surprise to the Miator Student Council. Everyone knows that Shizuma-sama entered the competition on a whim, as a tool to get closer to the new transfer student, Aoi Nagisa. Other than Rokujo Miyuki, Miator didn't have any strong candidates in the Fifth Year classes. They were all overshadowed, virtually unnoticed, because of Shizuma-sama's powerful presence. Also, the Miator Student Council couldn't stand the way President Shion cockily hyped up Amame-sama's impending victory. So they backed up Shizuma-sama's participation, just to beat our school." Momomi voiced her opinion with her usual machine gun rapidity, overwhelming Kaname.

"Well, that might all be true...but if Miator wasn't serious at first..." Kaname muttered. She was surprised that Momomi, who was usually light-hearted, was taking things so seriously.

Kaname continued, "It was Lulim President Chikaru-sama who introduced Makoto to the *Étoile* Executive Committee... and the person who benefits most from Makoto's victory is..."

Subconsciously, Kaname began to say "Makoto" without the honorifics, without hesitation. "Makoto herself, right?"

Momomi quickly replied to Kaname's lazy analysis. "What will she gain from winning the *Étoile* crown?"

"Gain?" Kaname pondered.

"Jeez. Instead of going to Junior High here at Spica, Makoto went overseas to study music. There is absolutely no value in her coming back to study at Astraea. And I know this might sound really disrespectful, but... I'm pretty sure she thinks this whole *Étoile* thing is a big joke."

Kaname's expression hardened. "A big joke?!"

Momomi tried to calm her down. "Ohh... sorry, it's not how I feel about it. I was just explaining how she might be feeling, okay? But... the *Étoile*... the *Étoile* is the true star of campus, the most revered couple. Outsiders probably don't understand our point of view about it, so..."

“I guess I see your point...” Kaname agreed; even she was aware that the excitement over the *Étoile* probably sounded absurd to most people. But Astraea Hill, isolated from the rest of the world, had nothing besides the three prestigious all-girl schools. The *Étoile* competition was the only big event for the students, and it was especially important to long-time Astraea residents like Kaname and Momomi.

The *Étoile*—the biggest star, shining over Astraea. Every year as the time of the competition drew near, the maidens of Astraea became obsessed with the contest, wondering which couple would become the next *Étoile*, and rule over the school for the coming year.

The girls all knew there was no decisive factor for choosing an *Étoile*. There weren't any any specific qualities one had to have in order to become an *Étoile*.

Beauty didn't matter.

Leadership didn't matter.

Good grades or being active in club activities didn't matter.

Fashion sense and volunteer activities didn't matter.

In fact, there were no clear-cut selection standards that qualified a couple to become an *Étoile*. The *Accord d'Étoile*—Rules of the *Étoile*—which were supposedly held in the Miator archives, stated, “Once a year, one senior and one junior *Étoile* shall be chosen to represent the student body. The pair shall serve as role models for the all of the maidens that live on Astraea Hill.”

Étoile... the one star that illuminated the entire hill. Roughly two thousand girls from affluent families were gathered in the three schools. Astrea brought together all the young flowers of the world, like lilies, cherry blossoms, peonies, and roses, producing a powerful yet sweet fragrance. The beautiful and powerful star must have an attractive force strong enough to become the center of this rich universe. The type of star no one could keep her eyes off of.

The star must be able to shine in the beautiful sky, dazzling all the girls below, a couple that all the girls admire and long for, ever-perfect role models that energized the hill to its core.

That was the world of Astrea Hill.

“If that’s all true, and Mokoto thinks this is some kind of joke, I don’t want her to win at all.” Kaname stared at the stage, her expression handsome instead of harsh. It was a look Momomi hasn’t seen before. She became lost in her admiration of Kaname’s face. *I never noticed how pretty she is.* Momomi’s cheeks turned rosy pink and she hoped her thoughts were not apparent on her face.

Kaname loved Spica. It was a place where she could be her true self. She always felt that she should have been born a male, but here she could express herself freely, without worrying about how others thought of her.

Many girls in this beloved flower garden loved her dearly. And it was here that she met Amare, the prince of her dreams. In the Prince she finally found a person to emulate. Even after Amare was eliminated, Kaname’s feelings for Amare were the same. She wished for happiness at this very place, where she found true love.

“A mere transfer student cannot possibly become our *Étoile*,” Kaname muttered. Her throat was suddenly dry, and she wondered if she would be able to share her thoughts without biting her own tongue. “I won’t allow a childish shorty like her to trample on our feelings.” Her fingers dug into her palms as she clenched her fists hard.

Momomi looked shocked. *Does she really think Makoto is such a threat?*

“Yes, Makoto is still like a child in many ways. She’s simple and honest, and in my opinion, I don’t think she’s *Étoile* material, but instead is longing for a reliable, older oneesama. That’s why I don’t believe Makoto is capable of tricking people. But there is someone who is known to scheme, and unlike Makoto, can benefit from this victory.”

Kaname knew exactly who Momomi was talking about. *Yes, that person appears from time to time, softly urging things to go her way...* Just as she finished the thought, she glared at Momomi. “I told you not to say ‘Makoto’!”

Momomi rolled her eyes. “Jeez, don’t take it wrong. It’s not like I talked to her directly or anything, okay? But it sounds weird to call her ‘Kusanagi-san’, and ‘Makoto-chan’ sounds so...”

“Humph! She’s not cute enough to be called ‘Makoto-chan’!! She looks like some sort of overhyped, snotty teen idol,” Kaname grumbled.

Momomi was amused at how seriously Kaname reacted.

“Oh, on second thought, ‘Makoto-chan’ is very fitting. She’s more of an actress than an *Étoile*.”

Momomi chuckled, hiding her mouth with her folding fan.

“Oh my gosh! You won’t believe it! Amane-sama and Hikari-oneesama!” The shout came from Okuwaka Tsubomi. She burst into the hall, a royal blue student council insignia embroidered on her uniform sleeve. On her face was a look of total shock, her jaws opening and closing like a fish. She took center stage in the fully packed dance hall, huffing and puffing with reddened cheeks, breathing so hard she could barely finish her announcement.

Kaname stepped up to help her. “What’s wrong, Tsubomi? What happened to Amane-sama and Hikari-oneesama?”

At the same time, a different voice overlapped Kaname’s. It was Spica’s President, Tomori Shion. Though she was supposed to be presenting the awards on stage, she left the stage and approached Tsubomi, distress in her voice

“What happened to those two...?” Both she and Kaname grabbed Tsubomi from each side. No one had seen Shion this frantic before.

“The both of them...” Tsubomi stammered nervously, her upper lip beaded with sweat. “Aaahh, umm... I overheard the nuns speaking... and...”

Everyone else in the hall began to quiet down. The girls directed their attention to Tsubomi. Murmurs swept through the crowd.

What’s wrong?

What happened to Spica’s star, the prince who lost her glory?

When the crowd fell silent, Tsubomi continued in a feeble voice. “Amane-sama and Hikari-oneesama... escaped from school...”

Shion froze in shock, and her face went pale. She staggered backward, falling on the floor.

The next instant the crowd erupted, voices of anger and excitement thundering around the ballroom. Spica's proud white prince, disqualified from the *Étoile* competition and stripped of her glory, had escaped from the school with her partner.

There weren't any clear details of what their disappearance meant, or even if it was true, but excitement brewed as the faces of the girls in the hall turned either blue from shock or red in anger.

After a while, Shion stood up again. "Everyone, please simmer down. The award ceremony is now over. Everyone please exit the hall immediately."

Makoto stood on the empty stage, witnessing the commotion, her mind a blank except for one thought. *What happened?! They left school...?*

Her perplexed partner, Kagome, gazed up at Makoto. Her face was ghastly white as she stared off to a distance, like Kagome wasn't there at all. Kagome, afraid, closed her eyes and tightly hugged her teddy bear. Makoto lost her balance and crumbled to the floor.

While most of the people had left the stage to ask Tsubomi for details, Chikaru went to Makoto's side. Right before Makoto hit the floor, Chikaru reached out and caught her. "Phew...that was close," Chikaru said.

Chikaru and Kagome were the only witnesses to the silent tears that rolled down Makoto's cheeks.

Shizuma ran through the campus like a vicious god. *I must find Nagisa immediately.* She respected Miator's rules and loved the uniform, so she rarely ran while wearing it. She felt the classical uniform skirt wasn't made for running, and besides, it wasn't proper for a lady to run.

Miator's queen, Hanazono Shizuma, usually made it a point to walk calmly, gracefully, and elegantly. But when she heard the news from Miyuki and left the student council room, Shizuma's steps became heavier and heavier, and soon she was running.

I can't accept this situation. It must be a misunderstanding. It happened so long ago, so why? Frustration and doubt circled Shizuma's mind. *I must hear it*

from her mouth to believe it.

Miyuki's words echoed in Shizuma's head. *Nagisa has probably reached her limit. I tried to have her reconsider, but when I saw her eyes...I couldn't say anything.*

"Her limit? What do you mean?" Shizuma questioned in anger.

"I believe the pressure of being by your side, Shizuma-sama, was too much for her. Being a new transfer student must have multiplied it a hundred times," Miyuki had replied.

"But why now?"

"As I stated, she probably reached her limit today and..."

"I cannot believe this!"

"Shizuma-sama, a strong person like you does not understand such pressure. But those who are weak must always fight the temptation to flee. She had barely arrived when she was pressured to participate in the *Étoile* competition, the biggest event of Astraea. And as you know, there was more anticipation and excitement for this year's competition than ever before." Miyuki hesitated.

"Nagisa *did* state that the main reason she chose to withdraw was because she broke the rule and saw you during the "Faceless Devil" trials, but..."

"But?"

"While I told her she was honest and conscientious, and those are both good qualities, Suzumi-san and I both tried to explain to her that she need not resign over it. So I don't believe that the infraction was the only reason behind her withdrawal. If she really cared at all about Miator and Shizuma-sama, then..."

Shizuma was extremely irked by Miyuki's comment. She kicked the chair as she stood. "Well, maybe you guys weren't convincing enough? Face it, I don't think she'd listen to you or Tamao. That's why I should go talk to her," Shizuma blurted.

Miyuki tried to stop Shizuma. "Please wait, it's..." With a troubled look, she stopped short, clapped a hand over her mouth, and looked away.

Shizuma narrowed her eyes. "I haven't seen you make a face like that in a

while. You must know the other reason for Nagisa's withdrawal... right?" She sat back down. "Miyuki...?"

What are you afraid to say? Shizuma's voice was cold and fearful.

"Tell me now."

Miyuki froze. She looked at the table and said in a trembling voice, "Y-Yes... it's..." After a brief pause... "She probably felt threatened by the enormous amount of pressure created around the *Étoile* competition..." Miyuki shook in her chair, her whole body trembling.

Shizuma kicked the chair. "Enough already." She stormed out of the room, creating a lot of noise, but Miyuki was too scared to look up.

Shizuma ran faster, as if she was trying to suppress her growing anger. *Don't make a foolish mistake, Nagisa...*

I must find her and set things straight. I cannot allow her to quit the Étoile competition without my consent. It's not like her to quit like this. My Nagisa is always bright and cheerful, never gives up, and is so very sweet. Her love and care for others is as deep as the ocean. I want to kiss her for being so beautiful and pure.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a shout.

"Shizuma-sama!"

The sound stopped Shizuma cold. She was about to leave the school building, instinctively headed for the place she and Nagisa last spoke—a section of the large Miator library called the Secret Garden. The voice came from the same direction.

Nagisa? Is she waiting for me?

Shizuma ran towards down the dim hall and up three small flights of stairs. When she reached the door that led to the garden, the bright early summer light burst through a window, momentarily blinding her. When her eyes adjusted, she saw a girl's silhouette underneath the door's arch.

"Hitomi?"

Togi Hitomi was in the same grade as Shizuma, and also one of her closest friends. Shizuma thought it was strange for her friend to be waiting for her like this.

“You seem to be in a hurry, eh?” Hitomi slyly smiled.

It's no use explaining things to her, Shizuma thought as she tried to slip past Hitomi. “Yes, I’m searching for something,” Shizuma said as she tried to squeeze past Hitomi.

Hitomi grabbed her arm. She didn’t look at Shizuma, but kept her eyes forward, gazing into the distance.

“Are you looking for that girl? Even if you find her, she won’t be convinced.” Hitomi’s confrontational tone took Shizuma by surprise.

Hitomi slowly turned her head, a very serious look on her face. “Shizuma-sama...how do you...really...how did you really feel about...Kaori?”

Hitomi was usually very brash and aggressive, but she deeply admired and respected Shizuma. This was the first time she had directly confronted her friend.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” Shizuma snapped. She didn’t want to waste her time here, not when she needed to find Nagisa before she got too far away.

Shizuma didn’t look at Hitomi’s face either, and an air of uneasiness dropped over the two childhood friends. Suddenly, Hitomi began to cry.

“Kaori...,” Hitomi said between sobs, “...really loved you, Shizuma-sama... which is why I brought her to you...” She gripped Shizuma’s wrist and looked her straight in the eye. Teardrops rolled from the corners of Hitomi’s red eyes. “If she was happy to be with you, then I was fine with that...”

Hitomi, overcome, looked down. Shizuma, standing at an awkward angle, couldn’t hide her shock.

“Hitomi, don’t tell me you had feelings for her?”

It all makes sense now... Shizuma embraced Hitomi before she crumbled to the ground. Hitomi leaned into Shizuma and cried in her arms. Hitomi’s tears,

spurred by her feelings for Kaori, covered Shizuma's bosom and stained her uniform.

She held her feelings in all this time...

Shizuma recalled the darkest day of her life. At Kaori's funeral ceremony, Shizuma remembered Hitomi standing in the shadows next to the chapel. Mizuho, who was always by her side, wasn't with her. Instead of sharing her grief with others inside the chapel, Hitomi stood alone, crying in silence, trying to hide her tears. She had looked hopelessly sad.

Shizuma had found Hitomi's behavior at the funeral to be peculiar. *I didn't realize how terrible Kaori's death was for her...*

Shizuma pulled Hitomi away and looked at her face. With one finger, she lifted Hitomi's chin so she could see her properly.

Hitomi didn't want to show Shizuma her tear-soaked face, but she complied. She was compelled to stare into Shizuma's eyes. Shizuma planted a kiss on Hitomi's forehead.

I'm sorry...I'm so sorry for not knowing your feelings for her. When you introduced Kaori to me for the first time in Hokkaido, in early summer, had I known about your feelings, I wouldn't have grown so close to Kaori...

"Panties, socks... pajamas, towel... and umm..." Nagisa turned to look at her uniform hanging in front of the closet. It was a dark green one-piece dress—the color dubbed "Miator green"—with an off-white short-sleeve blouse.

Though it was a lightweight summer uniform, the pannier added volume and the black lace trim added finesse, giving it a classical and elegant look. It fluttered with the breeze that blew through the window.

The summer uniform was similar to the charcoal-gray winter one, which had intricate lace trim on the cuffs and collars. Its style totally set it apart from the other all-girl schools.

Nagisa recalled the excitement and worries of when she first held this uniform. "I thought I was too childish for this mature uniform," she muttered to

the empty room. She continued to pack.

I was right. This school is too mature for me. Nagisa held back her tears and stuffed her bag. Yeah, I need to leave today. I don't belong here anymore...

She had only been at Miator for three months, but every day had been exciting. Meeting Shizuma-oneesama, sharing a room with a good friend like Tamao-chan. And the way the younger Chiyo-chan looked up to her was kind of flattering.

This place is totally different than my old neighborhood schools. Astraea Hill has a rich history, and long-standing traditions, and everyone here lives with such high standards and discipline.

Regardless of their year, everyone around Nagisa acted so mature and independent, and always looked into the future.

Maybe it's because they have a college in mind, something to strive for, but every student always thinks about their goals in life.

Upper-class life, and the expectations that surrounded these affluent girls, made their families cautious and prudent. The girls were expected to get good grades and, here at Astrea, they could be shut out from the rest of the world. But their lives were also troubled as they were pulled into their families' squabbles regarding heirs and the old tradition of political marriages.

Nagisa had never been exposed to such things until now. It surprised her to learn that some of the students were already engaged. What was even more surprising was that these girls, as a way to escape from the reality of their lives and to enjoy their brief youth, often had serious feelings for other girls. Such a revelation had shocked Nagisa, but, before she realized it, she had fallen right in the middle of their drama.

Nagisa had never been attracted to anyone before. All the girls around her, since elementary school—no, even kindergarten—always talked about their crushes.

Some girls had crushes on boys in their class, and some had crushes on their teacher. Others had crushes on their older cousins, and some even vowed to marry their favorite singers. But Nagisa had had no interest in such games.

“Nagisa-chan, who do you have a crush on?”

Every time someone asked me that question, I always just scratched my head and said that I didn't have anyone in mind. But nobody believed me, and they teased me for hiding my feelings. But, I really...

Nagisa had only been at Miator for three months, but she had accumulated a lot of things. She tried to stuff them into her bag.

I really didn't have any crushes back then. I was just happy to be with my family and had lots of fun with all my friends. The thought of having a crush never occurred to me.

Nagisa's happiness came from simple things: pretty meadowsweet blossoms, or eating a delicious apple pie with friends at a classy café. She had never experienced the excitement of seeing a person she liked at school, or being able to talk to the person she liked at the student council. She couldn't even imagine how she'd feel if she ever fell in love with someone.

But when Shizuma...oh, how my heart throbbed!

Nagisa blushed at her own thoughts. Her first kiss had been with another girl whom she just met, before she could experience first love with a boy.

Nagisa's hands, busy packing, stopped. She thought about what she had done at this school. Her hands flew to her mouth as her tears bubbled up in her eyes.

I never realized how much...I love Shizuma-oneesama...

Nagisa realized she had experienced her first love. *Oh jeez...*

She didn't even bother to wipe her tears, but just stood there, lost in her overwhelming emotions. Then another thought occurred to her, like a stab to the heart. She was leaving.

I can't go back now...

The Miator students would never forgive Nagisa for quitting the esteemed *Étoile* competition. Many students at Miator thought a new transfer student like Nagisa shouldn't have entered the competition, but had grudgingly accepted her because Miator didn't have any other viable candidates.

Of course, Nagisa wasn't the person everyone was rooting for—the Miator

students had put all their hopes into Miator's Queen, Hanazomo Shizuma. She was the only person who had a chance to defeat Prince Amane, Spica's white prince, the most likely to win the *Étoile* crown.

Knowing how Shizuma was—confident and overindulgent—and no matter how spontaneous her decision, she chose Nagisa to be her partner. The students had no choice but to accept Nagisa to ensure Miator's chance at victory.

It was the only reason Nagisa was tolerated.

Well, we did win second place in the first round...for Miator...

The Miator students had supported them, for the sake of Miator's honor, as they watched the competition. *I was just a tag-along, Nagisa thought. They never said anything, but I knew they all wanted me to just stay silent and ride on the coattails of Shizuma-sama's glories.*

But I was okay with that, because, while being with Shizuma-sama brought me immeasurable amounts of anxiety and nervousness, I also felt an indescribable happiness. I didn't expect Shizuma-oneesama to care for me so much. It was a little overbearing.

The way Shizuma's whim had stirred up Nagisa's life she couldn't enjoy normal campus life because of all the jealousy and whispers. She readily admitted that she wasn't the right person to be Shizuma-sama's partner.

"I know Shizuma-oneesama is a really wonderful person and all, but I'm not a good match for her. It's got to be some sort of mistake. I'm really honored that she wants to be with me, but I don't know what to do."

I must have been smiling when I said that, because everyone shrugged off my concerns. They must have thought that I enjoyed the attention. But I told them I didn't want to compete.

Knock, knock, knock, knock...

The startled Nagisa dropped the clothing in her hands. A pair of white panties landed on her knees.

“No! Please! Nagisa-chan, don’t go...!”

Suzumi Tamao burst into the room and threw herself at Nagisa, sobbing.

Two girls walked under the bright sun, along a small wooded path that led to the coast. The sound of waves could be heard from a distance.

“Ah, the gymnaster flowers are blooming,” Hikari said. She pranced to the side of the path and picked a tiny, light blue flower. She looked over her shoulder, excited. “This flower blooms at this time of year. It’s really plain, but awfully cute, and it’s one of my favorites.”

Amane reached out to Hikari’s hand holding the flower. “Yes, this flower is pretty. Like you, Hikari.”

Instead of reaching for the flower, Amane reached for Hikari’s hand. Hikari jumped and dropped the flower. Amane scooped up the flower before it reached the ground and brought it to Hikari’s face.

Hikari’s cheeks turned crimson. “Sorry, I’m so clumsy.” She covered her reddened cheeks with her hand, a gesture that Amane thought was endearing. She chuckled and patted Hikari’s head.

“You’re so adorable, Hikari.” Amane put the flower in Hikari’s hand and kissed it. Hikari’s cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red.

Hikari and Amane were enjoying their brief escape from reality. They didn’t know where their spontaneous decision to leave Astrea would lead them, but they didn’t care. They were just happy to bask under the bright summer sun, enjoying this blissful moment.

Hikari was thinking about the rumors she had heard before they left. *Maybe Amane-oneesama couldn’t bear the Spica lifestyle anymore, and that’s why she left with me.*

Even Hikari had noticed the enormous amount of pressure put upon Amane at school. *Of course it was all because she is a stunning prince.* Hikari watched Amane walking down to the beach with a handsome posture, and understood why Amane captivated everyone’s hearts. Every morning, the Amane-

wannabees met her at the gate. In the hallways, the lowerclassmen cheered and whispered as she walked by, and during lunch, the students lined up outside her classroom and made up excuses just to see her. There were crowds of fans around her all day long, even after school at the horse track, and in the Strawberry Dorms upon her return. It had gotten so stressful, Amane had told Hikari that she had stopped going to the large bath in the Strawberry Dorms three years ago, and that she avoided the midnight parties if she could.

Hikari had had an uncomfortable experience at a midnight party, but everyone else seemed to enjoy it, and if Kaname hadn't said those things, Hikari could have enjoyed the tea and sweets.

It was a shame that Amane-sama couldn't even enjoy such an event. *How much pain did Amane-sama have to endure when she declared that she wanted to be normal, like everyone else?*

Hikari understood the feelings of Amane's fans all too well, but she only knew a little about *Amane's* feelings. She knew that Amane loved Spica, which was why she had agreed to enter the *Étoile* competition, even if it was only half-heartedly. But despite their best efforts, Kusanagi Makoto appeared and ruined everything.

It was Hikari's fault for getting disqualified and sent to their rooms, under restriction.

At least that's what Amane's fans all said. Hikari thought it wouldn't be surprising if Amane hated Spica by now. Hikari was happy that Amane had chosen, and her heart was warmed by the golden rays of the sun.

How did we end up like this? Amane wondered. *Ever since I met Hikari, I've been acting really strange. I wanted to see Hikari so bad I broke the Étoile competition rules.*

Amane would usually never do such a thing. *We only had to hold on for only four more days!* If Amane had been stronger, they wouldn't have been disqualified from the second round, and they wouldn't have had to run away from Astrea Hill.

Though Amane felt the *Étoile* competition was pretty outrageous at times, she was never angry about it. No matter how much she despised being treated like a prince she accepted it, as long as she was able to attend Spica. She had been at the school since she was four years old, and she loved Spica.

If she could bear it for two more years, she would finish her obligations. After all, there weren't many places like Spica, which allowed her to ride horses all she wanted. She enjoyed the simple regimen of going to school and coming back to the Strawberry Dorms each day.

To be able to enjoy life at Spica was worth giving up some freedom. At least, that's what Amane had always thought. But when Hikari appeared, it was as if a bright light had cut through the clouds, and an angelic voice had come down.

A turbulent storm riled Amane's heart. Even now Amane didn't understand why she had such an overwhelming desire to see Hikari that night. After all, she only had to wait only four more days to see her. That was it. She had been stupid enough to think she wouldn't be caught. It hadn't even crossed her mind that her secret meeting with Hikari might have been exposed. *Maybe, subconsciously, I was angry over a rule that prevented me from seeing Hikari.*

That evening, Amane went to the chapel just to see Hikari. When Amane saw her little flower, she wanted to hold Hikari in her arms. She asked Hikari to meet her at the chapel again later.

She was surprised that Makoto had told the sisters about their meeting, but she wasn't angry. It wasn't Makoto's fault. It was Amane's. She had convinced Hikari, who wasn't familiar enough with Spica's rules to know any better, to come meet her, which caused Hikari to get locked up in her own room, under restriction.

And now, she had Hikari flee from the school with her. Amane felt bad for Hikari, but was overjoyed to be alone with her. Hikari, laughing under the bright sunlight, was simply dazzling.

No, Amane had no regrets about leaving Astrea.

This was the only thing we could do.

“Amane-sama! I can see the ocean!” Hikari yelled. The sparkling blue water peeked between the trees, winking at them in the sun, begging them to come and play.

The summer sun turned orange. It was near sunset.

“Your clothes are getting dirty,” Amane said with a chuckle.

Hikari tried to pat off the sand that stuck to her skirt. “Goodness, it’s really dirty. And I was being so careful not to get it wet.”

Hikari, cheerful as ever, lifted her skirt, exposing her pale white thighs.

“Your panties will show if you raise it any higher,” Amane said softly.

“Huh? Oh my gosh! Don’t look, Amane-sama.” Hikari blushed and tried to lower her skirt.

Amane grabbed Hikari’s hand. “Stop! Your skirt will get wet.” Amane’s hands stopped on Hikari’s thighs.

Hikari’s heart jumped and something swelled in her throat.

“Ah, umm... but...” Hikari weakly pushed away Amane’s hand.

“Don’t worry. There’s no one around but me. You shouldn’t get your skirt wet.” Amane pushed against Hikari’s hands and slid her hands up Hikari’s thighs.

Hikari gasped and froze, her eyes closed. Amane slowly dropped to her knees, her face almost scraping Hikari’s body. She grasped the edges of Hikari’s skirt, stuck between her thighs and pulled it out. The cool sunset breeze gently passed through the gap between her thighs.



Hikari felt a single drop of nectar trickle from inside her body.

Amane inhaled Hikari's sweet fragrance, an enchanting floral scent, and swooned. She swallowed deeply and shook her head to clear away the sweet temptation. "Let's go."

Amane led Hikari to her family's beachside mansion. The modern one-story house was made of bright gray concrete and glass windows and, compared to the dark rooms Hikari had been stuck in during restriction, the building looked brilliant.

Amane brought Hikari to the shower room, accessible directly from the outside. Both girls removed their sandy clothes. There were three booths in the white-tiled shower room.

"Please use any of them. I'll go get some towels," Amane said.

Each shower booth was separated by beautiful frosted glass partitions. Hikari bashfully hid her body and ran inside the booth on the end. She turned the knob to let the hot water spurt out.

"Ahh...that feels so good."

Hikari's body, which had been chilled by the sea breezes, was warmed by the shower's hot water. She closed her eyes, lost in her thoughts. Images of Amane swam through her mind, smiling and laughing.

Amane-sama...

Hikari felt unexpectedly carefree and really happy, despite having run away from school with Amane.

I thought I would be really nervous with Amane today, because I adore her. Until now, every time I was with Amane-sama, I was both honored and somewhat nervous to be with her.

But today when Amane-sama touched me, my heart thumped wildly, but I also felt at ease... and looked Amane-sama in the eye without hesitation. My nervousness was lost in the happiness of being with Amane-sama. I'm just so happy.

Hikari's heart swelled with emotion, and tears leapt to her eyes.

"What's wrong, Hikari?" Amane, wearing only a large white shirt, held a waffle patterned bath towel and robe.

"A-Amane-sama! It's nothing."

Hikari tried to rub the tears from her eyes, but Amane entered the booth before she got a chance. Amane wrapped her arms around Hikari and lifted her face. Hikari's face was wet from the shower, but small teardrops fell from her eyes and clung to her cheeks.

Amane looked concerned. *"Are you crying?" It's my fault...Is she thinking about school? Maybe she feels helpless, like I forced her to run away.*

On impulse, Amane placed her lips over Hikari's closed eye. She licked Hikari's tears.

"Ah..." Hikari moaned.

When Amane heard the sound her animal instincts took over. Only the sound of the shower was heard as Amane sealed Hikari's lips with hers. Hikari's body stiffened from surprise, but Amane pushed her against the wall and pressed her body against Hikari's.

I'm never letting go of you. I'm going to be with you forever...

Amane placed her lips on Hikari's neck. *"You're mine, Hikari..." Hikari's body is really hot. I wonder if the shower warmed her up.*

She touched Hikari's breast. Beneath the small, teacup-sized bud of flesh, Amane could feel Hikari's heart pounding.

"You're absolutely beautiful." Amane leaned down and tried to kiss Hikari's bosom.

"Ah... aahhh... no..." Hikari suddenly shoved Amane.

"Hikari?"

Amane was pushed out of the shower booth, confused about what had happened. She stood there, water falling from her short bangs. *Why?* Amane looked up—Hikari was beet red and trembling. She looked down at her hands

as if they weren't her own.

"Do you not want me to touch you?" Amane asked.

Amane looked really sad, and Hikari suddenly realized what she had just done.

"N-No, that's not it... I really love you, Amane-sama!" Hikari replied quickly. "But I've never been touched like that before, so I was surprised." *Why did I push her away? This is so embarrassing! If Amane-sama wants me, I'd give myself to her... I really want to.* This was the first time Hikari had ever been in this situation, and she was so confused. *I mean, before coming to Spica, I never imagined being with a girl like this...*

"I just got so nervous, thinking about being with my beloved Amane-sama, and..." Hikari as she looked down, embarrassed.

"You're so beautiful, Hikari," Amane said. "Don't worry. I'll protect you forever."

Hikari recalled the night her breasts had been kissed by another girl. That time she didn't feel uncomfortable being intimate. Instead of the fluttering excitement she had felt with Amane, she had been overcome by a sense of security and sensual pleasure, so she allowed herself to be caressed by the other girl. Amane's hands had brought those memories to the surface. The other girl's hands had slid all over Hikari's body so naturally, slowly building inside Hikari a deep ecstasy. In the back of Hikari's mind she knew this wasn't a normal type of intimacy, but for some reason, she felt that what Yaya did to her was okay. Right up until this moment with Amane, Hikari had felt it was an expression of friendship.

"Yaya-chan..."

When she heard that girl's name, Amane couldn't maintain her cool. Her face twitched.

"Yaya? What did Yaya do?"

"Um, the other night, Yaya-chan..." Hikari stopped. She didn't know how to

finish the sentence. She closed her eyes and thought about what to say to Amane. Hikari had believed that happened between her and Yaya was an act of friendship. Not with her head, but with her body. A normal friendship wouldn't lead to that sort of thing, but because it was Yaya... It was true that Yaya had taken off Hikari's clothes, caressed her body, and kissed her ears, fingers, and breasts. But at the same time, Yaya had also petted Hikari's head, hugged her, and whispered into her ear.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you. You should have more confidence in yourself, because a person like me loves you very much."

Hikari had been waiting for someone to tell her.

Have more confidence in yourself. Yaya whispered sweet words in her ear. The pool in the evening, with steam rising, under the moon, was like a dream. With those words and sensual hands, Hikari relaxed her body.

And Hikari knew that Yaya truly loved her, and that she wished for Hikari's happiness. What their classmates said about Yaya wasn't true—she wasn't just full of lust. Hikari felt Yaya's deep friendship. She showed her love not only with her words, but with her whole body, because that was how she expressed herself.

Hikari had accepted Yaya's feelings with her body. But how could Hikari explain it to Amane? Even now Hikari didn't feel guilty about it. Yaya was her friend. The way she expressed herself was a bit peculiar, but it had actually helped Hikari to feel better about herself, and her situation at school. She didn't think it was an act of betrayal towards Amane.

But how would Amane react? Hikari was afraid to find out.

"Hikari? Amane called out to her again. "Hikari, did Yaya do something to you?" Amane's last words trembled. Amane knew about Yaya's love for women.

When Hikari opened her eyes, Amane was drenched from head to toe, and her face was ghostly white. She stared at Hikari, wearing a look of disbelief. The rain-drop sound of the shower was so distant. Hikari fidgeted. She didn't want Amane to misunderstand the situation.

"Oh, no! Yaya-chan just tried to cheer me up. I know people misunderstand

her, but she's my best friend. She has always supported me for being with Amane-sama. I depended on Yaya-chan a lot. But, you know, she's that kind of person, and she did hug me quite often. But it's different from the way you hug me, Amane-sama. Because I... I... love you, Amane-sama..."

Hikari didn't know why, but her heart ached as she said it. "I love you so much, Amane-sama...so when you touch me, I get so..." Hikari started crying again.

Amane was taken aback by Hikari's explanations. She reached in and turned off the shower. Everything seemed to drop into sudden quiet.

"I see. I'm sorry for saying such a stupid thing." Amane covered Hikari's head with a towel. With her face hidden, she hugged Hikari.

"I don't doubt you, Hikari."

She put the bath robe around Hikari's shoulders. "Here. Get dressed before you catch a cold." She gave Hikari a gentle, reassuring smile.

Hikari borrowed clothes from Amane, but they were so big on her, it made her giggle. When she was dressed, she went into the large living room that faced the ocean. She sat on the sofa next to Amane. Amane had prepared some warm ginger tea. Hikari took a drink, and the warmth and sweetness went down her throat, soothing Hikari's dry mouth.

Hikari tried her best to explain again what had happened between her and Yaya. She spoke deliberately, and carefully tried to clear any misunderstanding. Hikari wanted Amane to understand Yaya's feelings. She explained everything, told Amane every last detail of that night. Yaya did take off Hikari's clothes and fondled her body. But that was Yaya's way of expressing her friendship. Hikari believed it was the only way Yaya knew how to express her feelings.

After Hikari finished speaking, she looked up at Amane, worry lining her face.

Amane paused before she responded. "If... it helped you, Hikari, I guess I need to go thank her as well. If she hadn't been around to help you, you might've quit the *Étoile* competition and disappeared from my life forever."

“No way...” Hikari blurted out, making Amane laugh.

“But we ended up quitting anyway, and running away, so I guess it doesn’t matter, huh? If we run into Yaya, I’m sure she’d be mad at us. How scary!” Amane joked.

Hikari laughed. “Oh, Amane-sama... I think...” She blushed. “I think Yaya-chan would be happy for us.”

Amane patted Hikari’s head, stood up, and told her she’d be back with more ginger tea. As she turned her back to Hikari and walked towards the kitchen door, Amane’s expression darkened.

There’s no mistake that Yaya really loves Hikari. She loves her so much that she accepts my relationship with Hikari. Hikari just doesn’t realize it. What kind of person caresses a girl as an act of friendship? I find it hard to believe. I know my desire to touch Hikari’s body is NOT from friendship.

Especially with Yaya...

Yaya claims to only love women, so it’s hard to believe that Yaya was able to make Hikari feel at ease while she was being passionately fondled...

Would I have been able to hold back like Yaya, if I were in her shoes?

“What are you doing?” a surprised Nagisa asked Tamao.

“Well gee, that’s what I came to talk to you about. I didn’t see you at Koubu Hall, and then they made that shocking announcement about your withdrawal and... then, I rush back here and find you getting ready to run away from home!”

“Run away from home? Well, umm...” Nagisa stammered. “I-I’m not...”

“Oh, come on, I see your luggage! I knew you’d do this, Nagisa-chan. I assume that since you quit the *Étoile* competition, you convinced yourself that you couldn’t stay here any longer, right?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“That’s why I came back, to beg you to reconsider. Gosh, I don’t know why

you decided to quit, but... Wait, I know! You couldn't forgive yourself for hiding out in the bathroom, right? But that was unavoidable. You don't need to worry about that stuff, Nagisa-chan! Or, did you finally realize you wanted to dance with me instead of Shizuma-sama? Aww, gee, Nagisa-chan, you're so honest! Of course you'd love me over Shizuma-sama." She winked at Nagisa, laughing. "Come on, don't run away from home..." Tamao chattered so fast Nagisa could barely get in a reply. But Tamao's teasing made Nagisa's despair disappear.

"Run away from home? Gosh, I'm not running away *from* home. I'm trying to run *back* home!"

"Jeez, Nagisa-chan, are you still thinking like that? Don't you know that Strawberry Dorm is your home now? And since I'm your roommate, I'm your family. Actually, I don't really care about why you quit the *Étoile*. Oh, fine, I'll come clean. I was lying when I said I was rooting for you as a fellow Miator student!"

"Ehh?" Nagisa was taken by complete surprise at her comment.

"Ah, well, I *did* want you to do your best. But Nagisa-chan, you're actually mine, so I didn't want you to compete in the *Étoile* competition with Shizuma-sama. If you're with me, I guarantee that you'll have fun. I mean, my biggest pleasure in life is to provide you with great tasting desserts. I'll do homework with you, sleep in the same bed with you, and I'll even massage you whenever you want." Tamao sat beside Nagisa and hugged her, then slid down and placed her head in Nagisa's lap.

"Ahaha... that tickles!" Nagisa cried out.

"Oh, good. Do you want me to tickle you some more?" Tamao tickled Nagisa in various places.

"Kyaah! Stop! You know I'm very ticklish..." Nagisa tried to squirm away, but Tamao pinned her down.

After a while, both of them had red faces, sweating, gasping, and laughing. Before she knew it, all of Nagisa's negative thoughts were gone.

"Darnit, I was trying to leave before anyone noticed," she mumbled, staring at the bright sunshine that poured through the window.

“You know I wouldn’t let you get away like that,” Tamao said. “Would you like some tea? I have some of your favorite crescent cookies left over.”

But Nagisa replied, “Thanks, but I really should leave.”

“Nagisa-chan...” Tamao looked up. “You should just forget about Shizuma-oneesama,” muttered Tamao. Nagisa became quiet.

I guess that wasn’t convincing enough. Tamao thought... and unlike her usual character, became adamant.

“Shizuma-oneesama probably won’t be mad at you for withdrawing from the *Étoile* competition, regardless of your reasons. And now that you’ve withdrawn, you can’t undo it. On top of that, if you leave Shizuma-sama, I’m sure she’ll recover in no time. Shizuma-sama can choose anyone from her pool of hopefuls. Her policy is to accept all and chase no one; in fact, she changes partners almost monthly. She’ll go out with anyone as long as they’re cute. You can bet she’ll find a new girl without missing a beat.”

I think my words were a bit harsh. It pains my heart to be so blunt with her. I hope she’s not hurt.

Tamao cautiously checked Nagisa’s expression. Nagisa had a big smile on her face.

“Yeah, you’re right. Shizuma-oneesama only thought of me as a stupid, naïve transfer student, so she wouldn’t miss me if I left her.”

I didn’t mean to be so mean, Nagisa. Tamao tried to say something, but Nagisa kind of knew what Tamao was trying to say, so she pretended to be mature and looked at Tamao.

“I won’t think about Shizuma-sama anymore.”

A chill ran down Tamao’s spine as Nagisa continued. “I know that I don’t match Shizuma-sama at all. That’s why I’ve given up. My withdrawal may mean nothing to Shizuma-sama, or might she might even be relieved she doesn’t have to deal with me anymore. But everyone at Miator might feel differently, right?” Nagisa’s said, half-hoping.

Tamao gulped. *Ohh, she’s given up completely. Where did my innocent little*

Nagisa learn to make such a face? The idea of Nagisa's heart breaking made Tamao want to cry.

Nagisa went on. "Everyone is probably mad at me. I didn't mean to, but a transfer student like me, who participated in the *Étoile* competition half-heartedly, only to quit halfway and stuff... I can't blame them if they accuse me of not taking the *Étoile* competition seriously."

"Ohh, Nagisa-chan, don't think like that."

Tamao was jealous of Shizuma, because Nagisa cared for her so much. It made Tamao sad. And upset that Nagisa harbored such feelings about Shizuma and not her.

"Ohh, Nagisa-chan, you're just going crazy because everyone's bullied you so much!" Tamao finally chattered again. "But you don't need to worry about any of that!" She hugged Nagisa. "If you decide to leave Shizuma-sama, that's fine. And don't worry about the *Étoile* competition. Everyone assumed the Prince would take the crown this year, so no one at Miator expected to win. And you were bullied so much, because all the other students were jealous of you, having the campus queen pay you so much attention."

Tamao made a silent vow to Nagisa. *Everything will be okay from now on, because I won't let Shizuma-sama near you anymore. Rest assured, I'll protect you. I'll make you forget Shizuma-sama.*

"Hey, Nagisa-chan, how about this? Promise me that you won't see Shizuma-sama ever again. Just tell everyone that Shizuma-sama dumped you. That way, no one will say anything bad about you. They all know Shizuma-sama changes partners on a whim. And you can enter the *Étoile* competition with me next year! What do you think?"

Nagisa's laugh was weak. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Come on, we can win for sure next year! If we do, then everyone will have to accept you, right? Right? Don't you think it's a brilliant plan?" Tamao playfully pinched sad Nagisa's cheeks and pulled them up.

"Nagisa-chan, if you're with me, I think we can win the *Étoile* crown. Actually, President Rokujo has been asking me to enter, but I wasn't really interested.

But if I pair up with you, Nagisa-chan, I'll have a lot of fun. And we can actually put all that dance practice to good use!"

Nagisa hung her head. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that. You taught me so much, Tamao-chan, but all that effort was wasted. I'm so sorry, Tamao-chan." She dropped her head lower.

Tamao hugged her happily. "Yeah, that's right! Now I remember. Nagisa-chan, you're absolutely right! You totally used me. I skipped all my club practices and council meetings just to coach you, Nagisa-chan!"

"I know." Nagisa shrank behind her shoulders, but Tamao grabbed her arms.

"If you want to make it up to me, you need to win the *Étoile* crown with me. It's a promise, okay? And don't ever see Shizuma-oneesama." Tamao grinned.

Nagisa wasn't sure how all of it connected, but Tamao was trying so hard to cheer her up. As she heard Tamao blather, her feelings of desperation went away, and she felt better.

"Gosh... Tamao-chan, you're so silly..." Nagisa chuckled. Her desire to leave the school grew smaller and smaller. *Oh well, whatever. I'll just stay here a little longer.* She didn't want to leave Tamao-chan and her kindness just yet. *I'll stay until I gather enough courage to leave again.*

Tamao didn't notice Nagisa's change in heart. "Promise? Great. Okay, it's time to celebrate with some delicious tea! I'll break out the vanilla tea, my special blend, and... Nagisa-chan's favorite crumble pie."

Nagisa jumped up. "What? We still had some left over?! You told me we ate it all."

"Tsk...I knew you liked it so much, Nagisa-chan, I ordered a new batch the next day! I was holding onto it for an emergency."

"Emergency?" Nagisa asked, perplexed.

"Yes, for celebrations like today, and other purposes..."

Tamao sat next to Nagisa again and hugged her. "And, for things like..." Tamao stared into Nagisa's eyes and brought her face closer.

Nagisa was confused ...*Hmm? This is...weird...what is she trying to...*

Tamao was so close they were almost touching. “Okay? This is to promise that you won’t meet Shizuma-oneesama anymore. And that you’ll enter the *Étoile* competition with me.”

Tamao leaned into a dazed Nagisa, and lightly placed her lips on Nagisa’s.

Knock, knock, knock...

Someone knocked on the door. Before either Nagisa or Tamao could do anything, the door opened.

“Excuse me...Kyaaaah!” Chiyo’s scream echoed through the hallway.

Tamao snapped her fingers. “Aww, I almost had her.”

Nagisa snapped out of her trance. “Chiyo-chan, what’s wrong...?”

Tsukidate Chiyo’s face was beet red as she answered, “U-Umm, I was worried about Nagisa-oneesama. I thought Nagisa-oneesama was upset or something, so I thought I’d make some tea.”

Tamao switched back to her usual self. “Aww, Chiyo-chan, you’re so sweet for worrying about her. That’s wonderful. We’d be glad to have some tea.” Tamao added a wink.

As commotion stirred all over campus, in the Student Council room, Rokujo Miyuki sank in the president’s chair. The enormous leather chair enveloped her whole body, including her head. It was her personal chair, one she brought into the room. She loved that chair; it was the chair of St. Miator Girls’ Academy Student Council President. But in her current miserable state, she knew it was only a matter of time before she’d lose this special privilege.

Miyuki was alone in the silent council room. Anytime she wanted to think, she came here. She’d only come when she was sure no one was around, during classes or breaks. But today was different. She was ashamed of herself, but running here was the only way she could deal with this situation. Shameful as it was, she was using this place to hide.

She couldn’t bring herself to go to Koubu Hall, where the second round of the *Étoile* competition was being held.

The winners of the round are probably being announced about now. I wonder which couple won? Did the Spica-Lulim pair of Kusanagi Makoto and Byakudan Kagome—the first couple in history that paired up students from two schools—sweep the competition? Oh well, all that means nothing to me now.

Even though Miator students had entered the contest, Miyuki no longer cared about the *Étoile* competition. Not now, since Shizuma and Nagisa had quit.

Though she had urged Shizuma's participation in the competition, Miyuki had kind of expected this outcome. *I miscalculated everything.*

Miyuki recalled Nagisa's face when she declared her withdrawal. *She looked so desperate. And though she never stated clearly why she wanted to quit, judging from her facial expression, I have some ideas. Someone either fooled Nagisa with false information, or she was hurt by jealousy, or maybe it had something to do with Sakuragi Kaori. Regardless, she probably felt she could no longer be with Shizuma. Nagisa probably couldn't bear it anymore. One way or another, I expected this to occur.*

Miyuki stopped her self-loathing for a moment, switching to repentance. *I feel bad for putting Nagisa through all this. Shizuma-sama's starry brilliance is much too strong. She burns out all the other little stars surrounding her. Shizuma is like a large, fixed star that continues to expand. The only way other stars can survive is either to be just as strong and passionate, or stay far out of her orbit to avoid being sucked in by her gravity.*

Neither option is easy. It's hard to maintain your sense of self next to Shizuma's overpowering presence, and even if you try to keep your distance, before you know it you're pulled into Shizuma's aura.

Miyuki shook herself free from melancholy and stood up.

*This is not the time to reflect on Shizuma. How will the Miator students react to this turn of events? Miator has lost all chances to attain the *Étoile* crown this year. Non-participation was one thing, but having candidates compete in the competition, only to quit mid-way is unacceptable. Considering this is Shizuma's second chance in the competition, and all the coordination that was involved, the student body will demand something from me for this horrible outcome. Should I expect to get fired? Or should I take responsibility and submit my*

resignation before that happens?

While Miyuki stood pondering, the door opened. The fragrant aroma of olives filled the room, and Marikoya Aiko, the Miator Secretary, entered the room, looking down. She gasped when she looked up and saw Miyuki.

“I apologize. I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

Miyuki waved her hand languidly, as if to say, “Don’t worry about me.”

Aiko smirked at Miyuki’s obviously depressed state.

Huh? Miyuki, thought, surprised. She didn’t expect that reaction from Aiko. The girl was tall and quite beautiful, so she was really popular among the lowerclassmen. There were several reasons she was content to being just a secretary, though she could have aspired much higher. Her face was always a mask, emotionless, a result of her upbringing in a former noble family.

So when Aiko smiled happily, Miyuki knew something big was up.

“But I am glad you’re here, Miyuki-sama.” Aiko held out the folder in her hands. “I found a document that you may find interesting.”

She silently walked over to Miyuki. “I hope you find this useful. For the person I admire...”

Aiko bowed to Miyuki and knelt beside her chair. She presented Miyuki with the file. It was an official document with the St. Miator Student Council watermark. The cover bore these words:

Emergency Report Regarding the Expulsion of Kusanagi Masaki, the first permanent *Étoile*

It was dated roughly nine years ago.

Chapter 2

The Hidden Road Sign Invites Those Who Are Lost

Okuwaka Tsubomi ran around, cleaning the empty Koubu Hall. Several other First and Second year students, also wearing council member armbands, were also there, pushing mops and rags across the floor. All the decorations and bleachers had been put away. The Koubu Hall gradually returned to its usual quiet state.

Yaya sat at the edge of the stage, watching the workers run around like busy bees.

I wonder how Hikari is doing? What was I thinking, when I...?

She recalled that night. In the evening light, Hikari had been so strikingly beautiful. She put her complete trust in Yaya. It could be felt through her soft, white skin. In the silence, Yaya removed her clothes, fondled her beautiful budding breasts, and kissed her neck. And the whole time she completely trusted Yaya as her close friend. Which is why Yaya hadn't gone all the way.

She bit her lips in frustration.

I'm so stupid. I went so far, and I just couldn't go all the way. I normally wouldn't stop halfway, so why did I? Ahahah... She almost laughed out loud, as she stared up at the ceiling. Koubu Hall's ceiling was about five meters high. In the center hung an extravagant chandelier that sparkled in the sunlight that poured through the windows.

Now that I look back, it was probably for the best, I guess. Hikari was able to regain her confidence and her smile.

Yaya didn't know how her words and actions had been taken. The next morning, neither of them could talk about what happened the night before. When they had tea during breakfast, she noticed Hikari's rosy face, filled with

happiness.

Yaya was afraid to break the silence. She wanted to tell Hikari to just forget what had happened the previous night, only she had been too scared. Maybe there was just a little hope in her heart that Hikari had accepted Yaya's feelings, that maybe she actually loved Yaya.

But, deep down inside, she knew the truth. *Hikari only sees me as her friend. Even while I was making out with her, she probably thought I was expressing my friendship in a strange way.*

It hurts that she only sees me that way. Hikari is clueless, but that cluelessness was probably the only thing that allowed me to maintain my close friendship to Hikari. If she had realized the true meaning behind my actions—which most people would have—it would have been the end of our friendship. Hikari probably would have run screaming. Luckily she didn't notice. And she still needs me.

Though Hikari had been forsaken by everyone, Yaya had given her love and brought back her confidence.

Oh, maybe Hikari didn't notice my true feelings. Or maybe she didn't want to acknowledge it. Ohh, this is ridiculous. Why am I wasting my time, thinking so negatively? Snap out of it, Nanto Yaya! If you had so much time to muddle around in your thoughts, then you should've just gone all the way. Have you forgotten what you always tell yourself? A love relationship without sex doesn't exist... Love is spawned from body heat and physical intimacy, so if you love the body, then love of the heart will follow suit. I don't believe in such a laughable thing as platonic love...do I?

Sigh... Yaya stretched her arms. It was torture, thinking about how Hikari was no longer hers, but a relief at the same time. At this point, she could only wish for Hikari to stick it through with Amane. If Hikari couldn't be Yaya's, then the girl needed to go far away, out of her reach.

Tsubomi ran through the Hall's entrance, on the other side of the room, and made straight for the stage.

"Yaya-oneesama!"

Another girl, wearing the white Spica uniform, was with Tsubomi. It was the school's Student Council President, Tomori Shion.

Tsubomi swirled her cleaning rag in large circles as she called out to Yaya. "President Shion would like to talk to you, Yaya-oneesama."

Yaya tried to jump down from the stage, but Shion waved to stop her, and slowly walked towards her, Tsubomi following behind like a puppy. Tomori Shion had an extremely slim figure, and her normally pale face looked even moreso today, probably from exhaustion.

I can understand why she would look beat.

Shion's plan for the *Étoile* competition had been thrown all out of whack, first with Shizuma's entry, then the nomination of Hikari, and then Makoto's sudden appearance. The final straw had come with Amane and Hikari's infractions and disqualification, and their escape from the detention rooms on the day of the second round. She had utterly lost face as the Student Council President.

Yaya felt kind of sorry for her, so her smile was sympathetic. "How can I help you?"

Shion nodded politely, as if to acknowledge Yaya's gesture. "Nanto-san, I understand that you share rooms with Konohana-san?"

Yaya nodded.

Shion's smile was small and fleeting. "By any chance, were you aware of what they were planning to do?"

Yaya hadn't expected the question, but she tried not to show her surprise. "Why would I know anything?"

Shion found Yaya's smile and quick response suspicious. "All right, then, do you know where they might have gone?"

"There's no way in hell I could know such a thing."

Yaya's protest was a bit overdramatic, which did nothing to assuage Shion's suspicions. "But I heard that even though others despised Konohana-san, you were on her side. Konohana-san isn't the type of girl who would make a move as bold as running away without giving it some thought, isn't that right? Which

is why I presumed she may have discussed her problems with you.”

Yaya, suddenly infuriated, cut off Shion before she could say anything else. “What would make you think that, President Shion? Hikari and I don’t have a special relationship. We’re just roommates. The fact that Hikari ‘ran off’ with her partner should prove that. Don’t ask me, ask Amane-sama. I really don’t know anything.”

“Oh, I see.” Shion was surprised at Yaya’s outburst.

From behind Shion, Tsubomi chuckled. “President Shion, if Yaya-oneesama knew something, she’d surely have stopped it from happening! Because Yaya-oneesama reeeaally likes Hikari-oneesama! I mean, she only gave her up because Hikari-oneesama likes Amane-sama, but really, she’s...”

“Hey! Tsubomi! Why are you bringing that up?” Yaya waved her fist.

Tsubomi stuck out her tongue at Yaya. “But don’t think you’re alone. You’re not the only one who likes Hikari-oneesama! I’m also really worried about Hikari-oneesama. I mean, as long as she’s with Amane-sama, I’m sure she won’t get into any accidents or anything, but I hope they’re okay.” Tsubomi looked as if she was about cry, so Shion jumped in.

“O-Okay, I get it! Enough of this subject. Let’s move on.”

Konohana-san’s popularity is surprising, Shion thought. If the Étoile competition had progressed as planned, we probably would have had a solid victory.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the loud click of the public address being turned on. A voice boomed from the speakers, making an announcement: “Attention please. Would Tomori Shion-sama from St. Spica Girls’ Institute, Fifth Year Class *Deux*, and Nanto Yaya-sama from St. Spica Girls’ Institute, Third Year Class *Un*, please report to the faculty room immediately.”

The three girls looked at each other, all wondering what had happened to Hikari, and then Yaya and Shion raced from the room.

Behind the Secret Garden—otherwise known as the library, a large, stone

castle-like building—a figure walked over the shadowy grass. Shizuma was disgusted with everything that was going on with the *Étoile* competition and with school in general, so she decided to leave her classes early.

It was early summer, and the lawn behind the library was green and lush. But right now all Shizuma wanted to do was pluck every blade of grass in sight, one by one, until the lawn was bare.

I've been so foolish. And so selfish—about Kaori, then Hitomi, and now Nagisa. My selfishness has hurt the feelings of many girls. It frustrates me to no end.

She had done so much damage without meaning to. And an action without evil intent is the biggest sin of all, because it cannot be repented. Shizuma was strong-willed. She knew that and liked it. And she couldn't help but draw attention to herself; she was quite an alluring girl.

Shizuma thanked God for her attractive qualities, but she knew her strong personality wasn't envied by others. Despite that, many girls were attracted to her. Like Sakuragi Kaori. And Shizuma, fierce and strong as she was, protected all those who loved her. It was a new development for Shizuma, ever since her encounter with Kaori. Before that, Shizuma had had a very different attitude. She hadn't cared for people who couldn't take care of themselves. She had looked down upon girls who adored her, as if she had to fulfill some void in their lives that they couldn't fill themselves. She felt sorry for those who placed hope in others instead of themselves.

But when Shizuma met Kaori, she realized the existence of true love. For an independent girl like Shizuma, it was difficult to believe in selfless love. She had felt the girls who liked her must have had some kind of ulterior motive. Shizuma had beauty, power, intelligence, and was a fearless daredevil; maybe the girls wanted to attain those qualities through Shizuma, without making their own efforts, to ride on her coattails and stand in her spotlight.

That was what she had thought, but now she realized those were merely illusions spawned from Shizuma's suspicious mind. The girls instinctively sought someone to love and to develop an intimate relationship with. It wasn't because of any logical choice, but stemmed rather from a physical desire, and

one of the predominant natural instincts of a human. To want someone, to love them and be loved. Shizuma felt in her soul it was the most happiness a human could have.

Kaori had lived her life like that, right until her death. It was the most important lesson she had taught Shizuma. And once she realized the truth, she appreciated her life with the maidens of Astraea, and even grew to respect them.

She vowed never to hurt anyone's feelings again. *According to Hitomi, Kaori was happy to be with me, but I wonder if she was really happy? Before she died, she may have seen right through my heart. Though I tried to protect her, I really...*

"Oww..."

Shizuma had walked through the bushes and accidentally snapped a stem off of a thorny brush. A little thorn was stuck in her pinky. The red blood swelled into a small droplet. Shizuma licked it, thinking it served her right, this little pain, after everything she had caused.

"What is the matter?" a voice asked. There was a rustling in the flowering trees and shrubs behind Shizuma.

"Who's there?" Shizuma turned around.

Rokujo Miyuki stepped through the bushes. A tall girl was right behind her—Marikoya Aiko.

"We were looking for you. I would like to share some confidential information," Miyuki said graciously.

"I don't feel like talking to anyone right now," Shizuma replied coldly. She tried to turn and walk away.

"It has something to do with Aoi Nagisa-san."

The sound of luxurious, rushing water echoed throughout the giant bathroom.

Clouds of steam saturated the room.

“So, how did we all end up here?” Shizuma asked Miyuki as she wiped the sweat from her face with a small towel. Brilliant sunshine flooded through the large window that looked out onto the inner garden. The white wisps of fog looked like gentle snow, and felt like heaven. The girls were sitting inside Miator’s public bath.

“Well, I suppose it is a little hot at this time of year to take a midday bath,” Miyuki replied nonchalantly. “But I assure you there is a good reason.”

“Err, is there a reason why I was brought here, also?” Marikoya Aiko, blushing, sat next to Shizuma.

“You’re definitely here to entertain me.” Shizuma pointed at Aiko’s breasts. “You’re thin enough to be a model, but you sure have a great pair.”

Aiko squirmed. “Please don’t look at me like that.” She didn’t last long in hot baths, they made her dizzy.

Miyuki cut in. “Please don’t tease my secretary too much. Actually, I thought this would be the best place to discuss a confidential matter with you, Shizuma-sama. We should finish before she passes out.”

Oh, so you brought someone to distract me from toying with you, eh? Shizuma mentally cursed, but she was intrigued by Miyuki’s secrecy. *What is going on in her mind?*

“Do tell.” Shizuma leaned against Aiko to keep her from fainting. Aiko, nervous, cast a sidelong glance at Shizuma’s deliberate movements.

Miyuki began to explain. “Today, in the St. Miator Girls’ Academy Student Council room, we found an interesting document. Something I’ve been looking for, regarding Spica’s legendary *Étoile*, Kusanagi Masaki.”

“Kusanagi...” Shizuma was surprised at the familiar name.

Miyuki continued with the details.

“Makoto is the younger sister of the legendary *Étoile*, Kusanagi Masaki. Their ages are far apart, possibly because they have different mothers. There are no records of the legendary *Étoile* graduating, apparently because she dropped out of school after the competition.

“As if that isn’t enough, immediately after her older sister’s disappearance, Makoto graduated from Spica Elementary School and left the country. This might be just a rumor, but the first *Étoile* may have run off with her lover, never to come back to school.”

Shizuma was taken aback by the details, but acknowledged them as if she was watching a play, the story detached from herself. “So what does that have to do with me and Nagisa?” She glanced at Marikoya Aiko, waiting for a chance to tug away the towel that hid her body.

“What does it... have to do...” Miyuki sputtered. “Well, I was hoping you would consider re-entering the *Étoile* competition—”

Miyuki tried to finish her sentence, but Shizuma interrupted by successfully yanking the towel away from Aiko, who shrieked.

“Ahah, gotcha! You don’t need a towel in the bathtub.” Shizuma joked, happy to get another eyeful of Marikoya Aiko’s gorgeous breasts.



Miyuki, exasperated, interjected. "Shizuma-sama! Please! Were you listening to me at all? You seemed to be infatuated with Aoi Nagisa, yet you fool around like this? It was this kind of behavior that probably cost Nagisa's confidence in herself, Shizuma-sama."

Shizuma dropped her hand and pouted. "It's over. She probably hates me." She turned her back on the two girls. Suddenly she stood up and mumbled, "I'm going to wash off."

Miyuki expected Shizuma to snap back at her, but she was speechless at the tame response.

A small splashing sound made Miyuki turn around. Marikoya Aiko had fainted.

As sunset rapidly approached, Amane sat thinking. Though it was early summer, the sea breeze felt chilly. Amane leaned her head against the window, looking out to the shore. The sound of waves breaking on the shore could just be heard through the glass. Amane thought about Hikari, lying in the guest room. She had lain, cradled in Amane's arms, and quickly drifted off into sleep.

This must have been one hell of a day for her. First being put on restriction, then running away, and then frolicking on the beach. Ever since we were sent to our rooms, Hikari hasn't had any time to relax. She tends to be hard on herself, so she when she finally did relax, she fell fast asleep.

Amane sighed deeply. *I guess I'm tired, too.* She laughed to herself, but at the same time a bitter concern filled her heart. Hikari's words played in her memory.

I know Yaya had feelings for Hikari. Everyone knows about her hatred of men, and that she's the only genuine lesbian on campus. But Hikari was so innocent and pure that I hadn't the faintest clue. I had assumed they never went past being good roommates. I was wrong. Amane laughed some more, not cheerfully. *Of course Yaya didn't. I should've noticed earlier. Yaya saw her the way I did.*

Amane couldn't believe her foolishness. When she acknowledged Yaya as her

rival to win Hikari's heart, a flame lit within her. But Yaya had encouraged Hikari to be with Amane, who was clearly her love rival. Most people would burn with jealousy over what Yaya had done, but for some reason, Amane wasn't angry. She actually appreciated that Yaya cared so much about Hikari. If the rumors were true about Yaya, then she probably could have used every trick in the book to get have her way with Hikari, but she had restrained herself.

Amane was filled with competitive spirit. This burning desire to win was something Amane hadn't felt in a while.

Amane had almost lost herself when she first encountered love, but she had found herself again. *Hikari loves me. And I love her. I must provide for her happiness, more than Yaya.*

In order to that, I know what I must do.

Amane stood, reached to the top of the unused fireplace and picked up the phone.

"You two really have no idea what happened to them?" Sister Carina, the disciplinary head, drilled Shion and Yaya. The two girls stood at attention in St. Spica Girls' Institute Faculty Room. They were not permitted to sit.

Sister Carina was a brunette with well-defined European features and rimless glasses. Her appearance made her seem glamorous, but she was actually a very gentle and caring sister, even though she was in charge of discipline. It was well known that she was very lenient and understanding in most cases.

But today, Sister Carina was unbelievably furious. So furious that she forgot to let them sit. Shion and Yaya cringed in fear.

"If you girls are hiding something, then you will be charged with the same infractions as them. Understood?" The sister eyed the girls suspiciously.

Yaya couldn't keep from asking. "Umm, what are they charged with?"

Sister Carina's sharp glare almost physically hurt Yaya. "It is a major infraction for a Strawberry Dorm resident to leave the campus grounds, but to have them leave while they are under restriction—*dear God!*" The sister made the sign of

the cross, holding onto the rosary around her neck. “I cannot imagine the number of punishments they will receive for that. We must find those two before they get into more trouble. If they are not found soon... Oh, Lord... At this point, they might receive the highest form of punishment anyway.”

The sister raised her hands in the air and crossed herself three more times.

“Don’t tell me the highest form of punishment is—?” Yaya whispered.

Upon seeing the sister’s reaction and finally understanding the school’s position on the matter, Shion’s face went blue. *This is no longer just about the Étoile competition. If they’re not found soon, their whole futures will be jeopardized.*

Sister Maria, the receptionist entered the room, interrupting the conversation. “Sister Carina, you have a phone call from St. Miator Girls’ Academy.”

Sister Carina did not even turn around. “Oh, please have them call back later. I’m in the middle of an important conversation—”

“But, oh...” Sister Maria, with a troubled look on her face, whispered something into Sister Carina’s ear.

Sister Carina’s face changed color. “The School Chancellor said that?” After a long pause, she waved Yaya and Shion away. “The two of you are dismissed. Please do not share this conversation with anyone.”

She stood up and ran out the door, leaving Yaya and Shion looking at each other, wondering what had happened.

Chikaru accidentally dropped the the phone back onto the cradle with a loud clang. She spun around to check. Kusanagi Mako lay still on the bed. She moved her hand but didn’t wake up.

Phew, that was close. She should sleep a little more.

Chikaru was in the Strawberry Dorm observation room, watching Makoto sleep.

The sun was in its final stages before disappearing from the horizon, the

burning orange rays pouring through the windows slowly turned to darkness.

Makoto's face seemed pale and ill, stricken.

I'm so sorry, Chikaru thought sadly. Mako-chan, I didn't expect things to turn out like this.

Chikaru looked into Makoto's face. The girl had fainted when she heard the words, "run away" during the commotion in Koubu Hall. Chikaru hadn't realized how deep Makoto's emotional scars were. She just wanted Makoto to confront and overcome her past, by competing in the *Étoile* competition... no, by winning the *Étoile* crown.

In Chikaru's mind, maybe Makoto would understand her beloved sister's feelings if she experienced the same things she had. And if Makoto saw Amane with Hikari, maybe she'd understand what true love was.

But, I wonder if it was a little too early for the poor thing.

Chikaru lightly poked Makoto's nose. She thought, not about about Makoto, but two people who were in a much more desperate situation.

Amane and Hikari.

Chikaru never imagined Amane and Hikari would run off like that. Honestly, Chikaru hadn't thought their disqualification from the *Étoile* competition wasn't a big deal. Those two were serious, though, which was why everyone had focused all their jealousy on them. Chikaru thought Amane should capture the *Étoile* crown just once. Amane was *Étoile* material, but she didn't seem to have enough self-confidence. Chikaru just wanted her to shine and be the star she was meant to be. But Hikari had appeared out of nowhere causing Amane to fall head over heels in love.

The reason why Amane entered the *Étoile* competition was not for the crown, but for Hikari. With such an ulterior motive there was no way Amane would achieve victory. As expected, rumors were rampant about the forsaken couple. If the awkward Amane and timid Hikari couldn't bear the stress then both *should* be released from the pressures of the *Étoile* competition, Chikaru thought.

I'll clean up the mess you two left behind... no problem.

She had tried to come up with a good plan. *Well, it really wasn't much of a plan, huh*, Chikaru thought. All she had done was write a letter to Makoto and tell her what was going on. Really it was just a good chance for Lulim to slip in and win an *Étoile* crown. Chikaru grinned. Her plan had made it easier for the other two girls to ease out. Chikaru knew Makoto couldn't resist coming back, a new candidate worthy of the *Étoile* crown appeared, and Amane's popularity waned. In the end, Amane and Hikari broke a cardinal rule and were disqualified.

Being disqualified was a major dishonor in itself, but really, how much damage did Amane sustain from this turn of events? After all was said and done, she only had to sit in her room under restriction. Surely it wasn't so bad they had to leave campus. Maybe Amane had put too much pressure upon herself because of her feelings towards Hikari?

Chikaru continued to ponder about the clumsy prince's struggles of dealing with her newfound emotions of love. *Cinderella only got her handsome prince with the help of a fairy godmother, right? I'm partially responsible for the way things turned out.*

She looked at the phone, thinking over the conversation she had just had. *I never wanted to have to rely on her. She'll hold the fact I asked her for help over my head forever. I wanted to be free of her, that's the reason I chose to go to Lulim in the first place. Sigh...but I bit the bullet and asked... I wonder if I should give up on the Class Z idea?*

She sighed again. The sun had set, and the room went dark. Chikaru moved to turn on the lights. The moment she stood...

"Hrmm..." Makoto woke up.

"Oh, you're up, Mako-chan." Chikaru greeted her with a smile. "Do you feel better?"

Makoto squinted and eyed her surroundings. "Where are we?"

"You don't remember? We're in the Strawberry Dorms' observation room. Mako-chan, after the competition in the Koubu Hall, you felt sick and wanted to rest, so I brought you here. This used to be a temporary clinic for small ailments, but these days, most students go straight to the hospital for

treatment.”

“Oh...” Makoto nodded, still squinting. “I had a dream.”

“What did you see? Was it a wonderful dream about the dance?”

“I saw Masaki-oneesan in my dream. My beloved Masaki-oneesan, my sister, whom I can never see again.”

The name came out of Makoto’s mouth rather naturally. Makoto and Chikaru were both surprised. They looked at each other and started laughing. When they got control of themselves, Makoto wondered, “Why couldn’t I say her name until now?”

“Well, because you probably loved her so much, that’s why,” Chikaru smiled.

“Yeah I really loved and respected her. I was really shocked at what happened. So when Prince Amane ran away like that, I guess all the bad memories came back to me.”

Makoto looked up to the ceiling with distant eyes. Her expression cleared as if she was at peace.

Chikaru was startled. “So, what was your dream about?” she asked slowly, careful not to disturb the fragile moment. *Just let it out and confess your feelings...*

Makoto seemed to pick up Chikaru’s wishes. She stumbled over her words at first, but explained everything while wearing a gentle, carefree smile.

“It was...the very first time I met her. I remember it so well. I always had short hair like a tomboy, but the “oneesan” who appeared before me was really beautiful, like a doll with long, straight black hair.

“I was nervous. We were going to my new father’s house for the first time. It felt like walking into enemy territory. This was going to be my new house, and I was still a kid. I thought Masaki-oneesan and her mother, the Mistress of the house, were enemies to me and my mom.” Makoto looked down bashfully. “Wasn’t that a dumb thought? But I really didn’t understand the reason behind things, you know? When I finally met my sister, I thought she was so nice and

pretty. She told me that I looked like a boy, pure and gallant. No one had ever called me gallant before. It made my spine tingle. Then, she said that she was glad I was a tomboy, because she always wanted a younger sister who was active and not too girly, and looked forward to catching horned beetles with me.

“The Kusanagi estate had a large wooded area, with a lot of horned beetles. I don’t know how she knew I liked to catch insects, and I didn’t expect a pretty girl like Masaki-oneesan to ask me to hunt insects with her. But anyway, I felt welcomed, and accepted, so I was really happy. Looking back, I’m sure she said that about the insects to please me.

“Up until that day, I always wondered why my last name was different than my dad’s and why he never came home at night.” Makoto shrugged. “I just started figuring things out. So I was just happy that I finally had a place to call home. Dad would come back to our big home every night, plus I gained a beautiful sister. I had never had a place to call home before that, so this was complete happiness. I went to the same school as Masaki-neesan, and wanted to grow up to be like her. Masaki-neesan was really sweet and feminine, and I wanted to protect her, since I was a tomboy... such silly thoughts.

“But then Neesan was gone one day. And I couldn’t forgive myself, because I thought it was my fault. I didn’t notice anything the whole time I was there. It was so obvious, too, thinking back on it. I mean, with me and my mom there, Masaki-oneesan must have been deeply hurt. But she held it in, never said a word. Of course, I was totally ignorant, and kept snuggling up to her, saying, ‘Neesan, Neesan.’”

Makoto humphed. “Neesan probably couldn’t wait to leave that house. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have run off with a plain girl. Neesan was the campus superstar, adored by everyone, the legendary *Étoile* of Spica. But she threw all that away and left with her partner. I actually don’t think she really wanted to run away like that. I think she couldn’t stand to be in the house with my mom and me there. I should have been the one to leave the house. It wasn’t until after Neesan was gone that I found out about her feelings and left the house also. But since I was too young to live on my own, I begged my parents to allow me to study abroad instead. Of course, it was kind of pointless because it was

after the fact. Neesan had disappeared.”

Makoto paused and looked up at Chikaru. “When I got the letter from you, my skin crawled. I couldn’t forgive the person who ruined the reputation of my Neesan’s beloved Spica and her venerable *Étoile* crown.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m so stupid. I tried so hard to punish myself and vowed never to return to that house. But I came right back to defend Neesan’s honor, even though Neesan wasn’t there. When Amane and Hikari ran away together, I was overcome with fears of my past. I’m embarrassed I passed out, though. I don’t think anyone should be forced to run like that.”

Clang clang... Nagisa scraped her knife and fork together, making an annoying, grating sound.

Girls across the table coughed to warn her it was rude.

Nagisa blushed. “Ah... oh, sorry...” She was eating in the Miator Cafeteria inside the Strawberry Dorms. After Tamao had calmed her down, Nagisa had lost her will to leave. She was invited to eat dinner at the cafeteria. Today’s menu had Nagisa’s favorites, Saltimbocca¹ and Gâteau à l’ananas², so she decided to come, but now she was wondering if it was the right choice.

I won’t die if I skip one dinner... Nagisa could feel the cold, piercing stares from the girls around her.

Yeah, I expected this much, since it’s my fault that I quit the Étoile competition.

Although no one confronted her directly, the girls sitting around Nagisa were unusually quiet. Tamao, sitting next to her, was quiet as a rock, unwilling to disturb the artificial peace.

But I want to go back to my room, right away... Tears welled in Nagisa’s eyes. Under the tablecloth, Tamao gently placed her hand on Nagisa’s knee.

We’re almost done. Hang in there...

Nagisa understood her silent but heartwarming encouragement.

She subtly wiped the tears from her eyes and brought her face up. *Okay... I’m*

gonna hang on. She scanned the room. Her biggest fear was bumping into Shizuma, but there had been no sign of her when Nagisa first entered the room. Tamao had reassured her that upperclassmen were allowed to take meals in their room, and Shizuma would be considerate enough to do so at a time like this. Nagisa didn't understand what she meant by "a time like this," so she continued to scan the area for Shizuma. But she wasn't there. Nagisa was both relieved and disappointed.

Dinnertime was almost over. Nagisa tried to stand up, but was stopped by a soft voice behind her.

"May I join you?"

Who...? Don't tell me... Nagisa gulped and turned. Behind her was the library staffer and Shizuma's former *Cadette*, Kano Mizuho.

After dinner, the sky was already dark. Dusk surrounded the sunroom, where Nagisa and Mizuho faced each other. Not too many people used the sunroom at night, so they were the only ones present. Except for Tamao, who was about two steps behind Nagisa. Mizuho had requested to speak with Nagisa alone, but Tamao insisted on keeping her company.

The sunroom was quiet, with a damp warmth and sweet aroma of flowers surrounding them. In the glass window ceiling, the stars glittered above, their only witnesses.

Mizuho broke the awkward silence. "I want to talk about Shizuma-sama and Kaori."

Nagisa's shoulders quivered. "I... don't..." She took a step back, wanting to run.

"No! You misunderstand." Mizuho spoke gently, softly, but with certainty.

"Misunderstand? But I heard from Togi-sama..." Nagisa blurted.

It was just as Mizuho suspected. "Hitomi told me about that. I'm sorry. Hitomi tends to say things bluntly, but she's doesn't know everything."

Nagisa still seemed suspicious, so Mizuho continued. "I'm probably the only

one Kaori ever told. Shizuma-sama and Hitomi weren't aware of Kaori's true feelings."

Nagisa leaned back, ready to take another step away, but she felt a warm presence behind her.

"You should let her finish, Nagisa-chan." Tamao's tone was serious as she placed her hands on Nagisa's shoulders.

The train roared as it thundered through the area. Outside the train windows, the sky was already pitch-black. Inside the small compartment, two girls faced each other in the old, green four-man booth.

Earlier, Hikari woke up to find Amane sitting beside her, wearing her Spica uniform. She seemed different than the day before, quieter. Amane didn't say a word, but her smile was radiant, as if she had been renewed and, as she wrapped her arms around Hikari, there was a fierceness Hikari hadn't felt before. Up until that moment, Hikari had felt that Amane was really wonderful and quite passionate, but at the same time, she was subdued and vulnerable, which made Hikari feel relaxed and comfortable. She wasn't sure how to react to Amane's change.

When Hikari tried to ask a question, Amane reassured her that she'd taken care of everything, but wouldn't go into details. Amane had asked Hikari to get up and put on her Spica uniform. They packed their things and left the Otori mansion. They retraced their journey, and after making several transfers on the local trains, they ended up at a large, unfamiliar station around midnight. Despite the time of night, the station was lively with throngs of people—something Hikari hadn't seen since she moved to Astraea Hill.

The lights inside the station shone in the dark night, revealing large crowds running to their platforms. Hikari could barely keep up with Amane, who protected her as they wove between people. They were on their train before Hikari knew it, the train pulling away from the platform before Hikari had a chance to check their destination. Unfortunately, the old-fashioned train didn't have a destination sign, either.

Once they boarded the train, Amane was soft and gentle as usual, but she

gradually spoke less, and finally stopped talking and looked out the window.

I'll be fine if I stick with her, Hikari told herself, despite the anxious knot in her stomach.

In the low candlelight, the only sound was the gentle splash of tea being poured.

“Oh no... I spilled some.”

“Ehh?”

“Kyaah! Oh gosh, the cake will get wet!”

The tea spilled onto the small table, which was cluttered with four tea sets and a plate of cake.

“Towel, get a towel!”

“Move the cake!”

“And the teddy bear, too!”

The tabletop candles wobbled, and the girls' faint cries overlapped one another. Minamoto Chikaru's Costume Club members were having a tea party in the Lulim dorm. Candles glowed inside the dark room, providing the only light. Kizuna, who was in charge of serving the tea, wore a white satin tuxedo and matching cape with the collar up. She usually wore her hair in pigtails, but tonight it was down which, with her costume, made her look like a pretty boy.

Natsume Remon, who swiftly wiped the table, saving the cake from the spilled tea, wore a black velvet tuxedo with little black bat wings on her back.

Kagome, the smallest of the bunch, had a tiny pair of paper fangs in her mouth like the rest of the girls. She wore a very feminine nineteenth-century one-piece dress with lots of frills and ribbons. She sat on a chair, holding her teddy bear, which she had dressed in tails and a top hat for the occasion.

“Gosh, if we keep these in, we can't eat our cakes,” Kagome said to her bear. She pointed to the fangs in her mouth. Kagome chomped down and crushed the fangs.

Once the excitement over the tea spilling had abated, Kizuna and Remon gave a sigh of relief. They looked at each other's fangs, then cringed and hesitantly turned around to face their leader. Chikaru sat in a chair, facing Kizuna. She wore a mermaid-style dress of ivory and sat upright, playing out her role of a proper lady. She looked at the clumsy girls and heaved a sigh. "I didn't expect this to happen."

Kizuna tried to explain, "But they're made of paper, so we can make them again."

Before Kizuna finished her sentence, Remon jumped in and whispered, "No, the paper will get wet again in your mouths and we'll end up with the same result." Remon's paper fangs had stuck to her mouth.

Chikaru held her forehead in distress, but finally said, "Well, I suppose it cannot be helped. You can all remove your fangs, just for today."

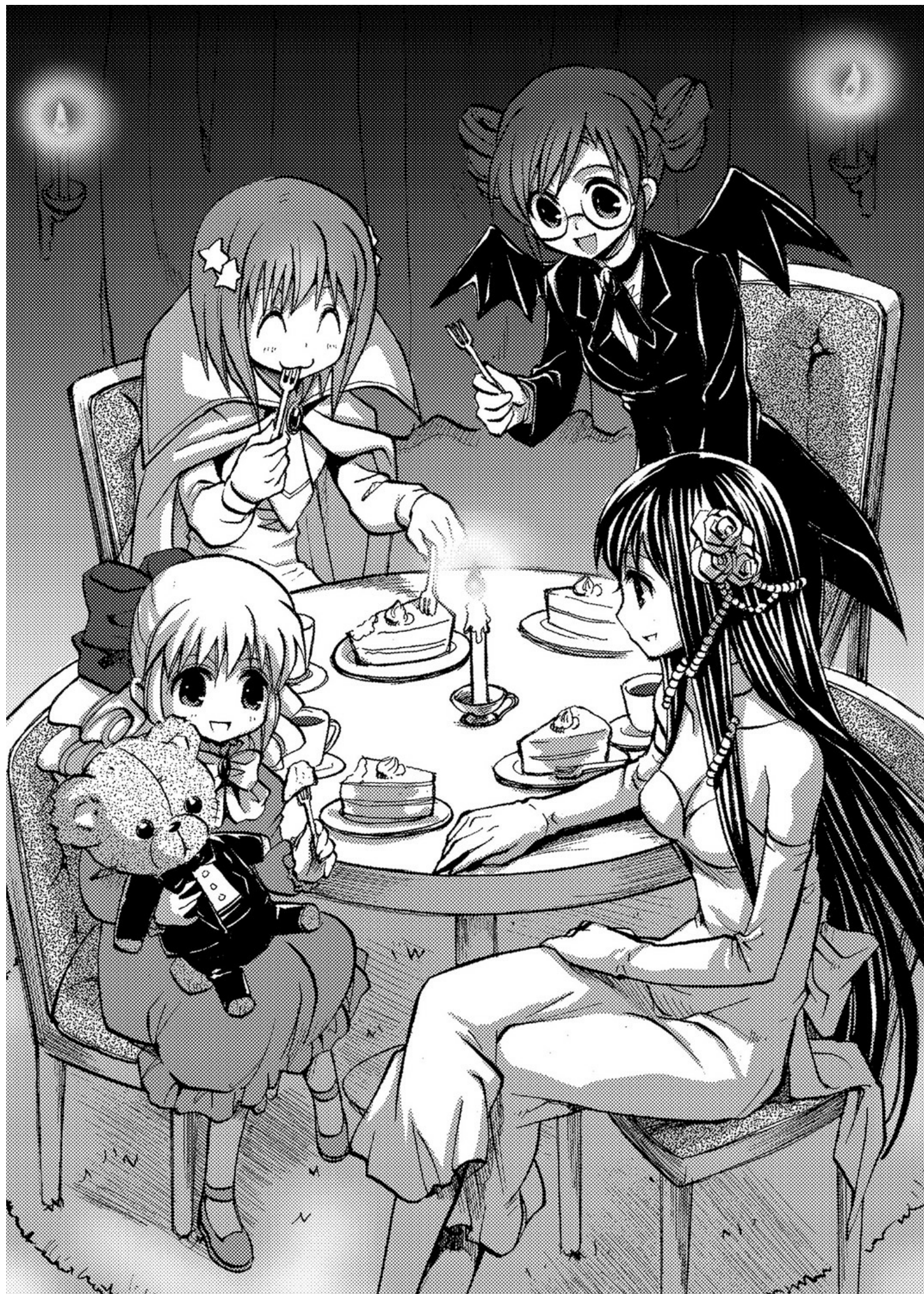
Kizuna and Remon jumped for joy.

"Cool! Now I can eat my cake real fast!"

"Great! I was actually really careful not to crush my fangs."

Chikaru cringed when she realized the fangs were quite unpopular, but she shrugged it off. "Oh, well! This was our first attempt at playing *Poe's Clan*³." She looked at all the girls. "All of you look great in your outfits. The 'pretty boy' theme works for us! We just need to get rid of the fangs. Anyway, this is a celebration for Kagome-chan's victory in the *Étoile* competition, so let's eat!" She raised her teacup and toasted.

"Yay...!" The three girls cheered in unison, flicked their fangs off, toasted Kagome, and ate their cake in silence.



“Kagome-chan, you were really wonderful today! I thought you were just an adorable little girl, Kagome-chan. But you were so confident that I was totally impressed. I didn’t know you were so good at dancing!” Kizuna said as she finished her cake and licked her fingers.

Remon chimed in. “Yes, Spica’s Kusanagi-sama was a good dancer, but you were just as good, Kagome-chan! You two looked like a prince and princess from a fairy tale.”

“Yes, you made a great couple,” Chikaru heartily agreed, smiling. She tried to pet Kagome’s head as a compliment, but Kagome frowned and buried her face into her teddy bear. She squeezed her eyes shut, and her soft cheeks were pushed out of shape by the bear as she pouted. Cake crumbs sprinkled onto the bear’s head.

“What’s wrong, Kagome-chan?” Kizuna had never seen Kagome make such a face before.

Kagome petted her bear solemnly. “I don’t want to be with Spica’s little Emperor.”

“Wh-Why? Did she do something to you?!” Remon asked.

Kagome kept her eyes on her bear as she replied. “She told me Mr. Teddy Bear was just a silly doll, and I couldn’t hold him while we danced.”

“B-But...” Remon wanted to agree with Makoto that it was just common sense, but she covered her mouth.

“Oh, that’s no good.” Kizuna deeply sympathized with Kagome. *That bear means everything to Kagome. Everyone knows she won’t let go of the bear, even for a second. Of course, dancing with the bear would have been difficult.*

Kagome nodded at Kizuna’s explanation, and tears welled up in her eyes. “And when Kagome shared Mr. Teddy Bear’s thoughts with Makoto, she laughed. And she gets mad when Kagome falls asleep... and... and...”

Well, Makoto-sama is pretty blunt, so I can see why Kagome-chan wouldn’t get along with her, Remon thought as she quickly moved over to comfort Kagome. *Yes, we understand what you’re going through, Kagome-chan, but*

everyone is rooting for you in the Étoile competition, so is there any way you can just make it through? Please?

Kizuna jumped in to help. “I see... I really feel sorry for you. How about I talk to Makoto-sama! I’ll tell her that Kagome-chan and Mr. Teddy Bear are really close, and ask her to understand. I think if we explain it to Makoto-sama, she’ll feel bad for treating you that way.”

Kagome smiled from ear to ear and hugged Kizuna. “Kagome wants to be in the *Étoile* competition with Kizuna-oneesama.”

“Eeeehhh?! Wh-What do you mean?” Kizuna exclaimed. She looked at Remon in surprise. How could Kizuna reply? She looked at Chikaru for guidance. She had been unusually silent through the whole conversation, wearing a grave look, absorbed in her own thoughts.

The small candle lights flickered in the darkness and dimly lit Chikaru’s face.

Chapter 3

A Sunless Sky Illuminates

the Invisible Truth Below

The eastern skies had just begun to show hints of white. Shizuma wandered around the Maiden Park, alone. She climbed up the gentle slope and stood at the center of Astraea Hill, at the edge of the lake. The predawn sky was still wrapped in darkness, but fresh morning air wafted over everything.

Shizuma slowly sighed and stared at the surface of the lake. The lake's calm, still water showed a reflected Shizuma, wearing a white quilted gown over her off-white silk negligee.

I look like I'm sick. Maybe it was her face, pale from lack of sleep that made her look ill. She hadn't been able to sleep at all last night, and when she sat up and checked the clock, it was before dawn.

Oh yes, she used to comment that my face looked pale, like a patient, didn't she...

Shizuma tried to keep the past behind her... but the memories swept over her again.

She recalled the conversation she'd had with Miyuki in the bath. Because Amane had suddenly disappeared, Miyuki wanted to request a rematch of the *Étoile* second round. She had begged Shizuma to find Nagisa and return to the *Étoile* competition. If that wasn't possible, Miyuki would reveal Makoto's past.

It was a ploy, Shizuma knew. Miyuki would never do that, unless she had no other choice. Shizuma had replied, "What would that accomplish? You, of all people should know that a person's family situation is beyond one's control. Besides, it was you who originally asked me *not* to chase after Nagisa."

Shizuma thought Miyuki was going to be flustered, but she had been ready for Shizuma's argument.

"I do admit that I am among those whose family situation is constraining. Which is why I had second thoughts about you and Nagisa. I am able to shine

like a bright star here on campus. I can enjoy my freedom until I leave school and lose my wings. You should be able to do the same.”

Shizuma had never seen Mizuki so serious. She had all but flat-out admitted that she was obsessed with keeping her position as the Student Council President. If Shizuma and Nagisa withdrew from the *Étoile* competition, St. Miator Girls’ Academy would be dishonored, and things might escalate to the point where the students might demand the Student Council members to take responsibility and resign. Miyuki really enjoyed her role as the president. When she left St. Miator’s, Miyuki would be stripped of her freedom, so she wanted to cling to her only bright light of glory as long as possible. It was a frank revelation from a girl who was usually quite reserved.

Shizuma couldn’t find the words to form an appropriate reply. She already knew about Miyuki’s saga. It was an unchallenged truth of a rich girls’ school, a sad, dark part of the life of a daughter from an affluent family. At the same time, it was the reason the girls at this hill strived to shine so brilliantly. To be desperate enough for Miyuki to spell it out so bluntly meant she had something in mind.

At this point, she’d use any method to win this year’s *Étoile* competition, so she could finish out her duties as the St. Miator Student Council President in a glorious fashion. Miyuki had half-given up hopes for this year’s *Étoile* competition at first, but through Nagisa, a lucky card, she was able to recruit the help of Shizuma; and once she had acquired a chance at victory, she would do anything to attain it. Miator still had a good chance of winning, Miyuki confidently stated. With Shizuma, victory was possible. So now, Miyuki wouldn’t hesitate to use any option available. She had come up with a plan to take down Makoto.

With Amane and Shizuma out of the competition, and once Makoto was taken out as well, the main competitors would be missing. If Makoto finally dropped out, it would be obvious to everyone that all the viable candidates were effectively removed at that point, making it a three-way draw. A rematch would be necessary. Miyuki pictured a drastic event, like the “Faceless Devil.”

Miyuki had explained all of this to Shizuma, her expression cold and calculating.

“So, I’m not sure what transpired between Shizuma-sama and Aoi-san, but, please, Shizuma-sama, please convince Aoi-san to compete again. It should be an easy task, requiring only one little phrase—‘you’re my one and only, Nagisa’—to get her back. Just like you did during the ‘Mouth of Truth’. Unless you didn’t really mean it then?”

Shizuma stared into the deep blue water of the lake and thought about the girls of this hill and their fates. *Oh, Miyuki...Acting as if you know nothing about the issues between me and Nagisa. You, of all people, know the circumstances all too well. Look at your harsh expression... I’m sure you don’t mean it at all.*

Compared to the rest of the world, the girls of this hill were beautiful like flowers, angelic, innocent, and naïve. They could have anything they want, and were promised a safe, bountiful future, and they seemed to live a luxurious lifestyle.

But their reality was far from glamorous.

Miyuki had a fiancé, pre-selected before she was even born. After she graduated from high school she’d spend a year learning some home-making skills, then she must marry her fiancé. Wealthy girls had to marry at a young age, so they could give birth to an heir as soon as possible—a ridiculous logic, indeed, Shizuma thought. No matter how intelligent Miyuki was, her family had told her that a lady does not require education.

In contrast, Makoto grew up away from her household. Shizuma had gotten the gist of her situation from Miyuki’s explanation. Makoto was an unwanted child. The harsh truth was that she was an illegitimate child. It must have been shocking to finally realize that she had been born because her mother had an affair.

Of course, Makoto was not to blame. But Shizuma wondered how Makoto must have felt when she realized it. The thoughts that must have run through her head, Shizuma could only speculate—*Why was I born? Why did my mother give birth to me, knowing that it would destroy another family?*

And then realizing the turmoil her most adored, beloved sister must have gone through all along, Makoto must have thought she was the cause of all the

unhappiness, and blamed herself for her sister's actions. Maybe Makoto was so brash because it was her only defense mechanism.

On the other hand, if you poke around Astraea, you will hear another story.

Shizuma had talked with St. Spica Girls' Institute's Nanto Yaya. Yaya openly despised men, and it was well-known she was a true lesbian. She was often compared to Shizuma in terms of the number of girls they fooled around with, so Shizuma was curious about her.

It was when Yaya had decided not to go home during summer vacation, and Shizuma had to stay back to complete a few tasks as the newly crowned *Étoile*. With fewer students residing in the Strawberry Dorms at that time, they had become "acquainted" with each other.

Yaya shared her thoughts with Shizuma about the father she hated. He never came home, going from one affair to another. A very foolish father, unable to hide it from her mother. Her mother had stopped loving her father, but asked for compensation for his affairs, receiving expensive jewelry and clothing, and partying around. Yaya's parents should have split long ago, but because her father had married into the Nanto family's wealth, it was hard for him to leave the cushy company president's seat.

Her mother was just as bad. She had given up on men, but as long as her father kept the business afloat, she was fine with all his philandering, because it maintained her high status.

Yaya's father had told her ever since she was a child, *If only you were a boy*.

At first, Yaya thought he just wanted an heir to his business. But nothing could be further from the truth, because by then, Yaya already had several half-brothers. The Nanto business was to be passed onto a male heir, but the oldest and only legitimate child was Yaya. Though she was the oldest, if any of the half-brothers wanted to stake a claim to the business, Yaya would have to defend her position. Once she realized that, she stopped talking to her father.

On the rare occasion when her father would come home, he'd ask her how she was doing with her studies, but it was doubtful that he even knew her age or anything else, for that matter.

Yaya had recounted her bitter situation to Shizuma. It was the reason Yaya hated men—she couldn't fathom touching such a filthy creature. Yaya vowed never to marry, and regardless of what others said, for the rest of her life, she was going to live with girls she loved.

Shizuma watched her face in the water and reflected on the situations that surrounded Miyuki, Makoto, Yaya, and many of the other girls of Astraea. She looked into the sky as it grew lighter and thought,

If there really is a heaven, are you there, Kaori? Are you looking over me?

What is going through your mind as you watch me and Nagisa? If only I could hear from you.

Shizuma raised her hands. A stiff morning breeze blew over the lake and rippled its surface, the cold, damp air fluttering the edges of Shizuma's nightgown.

Nagisa, I envy you. You are so honest and carefree, with nothing evil about you. I must seem so unreasonable to you. Not just me, but compared to you, Miyuki, Makoto, and everyone else must seem so strange.

Shizuma closed her eyes and thought about her impending fate. Shizuma shared the fate common to most girls in Astraea. She had enough inner strength to keep the pressure from fazing her, and she tried to ignore it, but her spirit was the polar opposite of Nagisa's, as carefree and bright as the blue sky.

Farewell, Nagisa. I don't want to draw you into any more trouble. I set you free. Because I love you.

Shizuma looked into the summer sky, a brilliant blue. *My dear Kaori, did you, perhaps, feel like this, too?*

Shizuma confronted Nagisa. "It's time to bid farewell."

Nagisa stood there, speechless.

"Thank you for entertaining me. You helped me pass some time."

Oh gosh, I was used to pass time? It felt like something was caught in Nagisa's throat, and she broke out in a cold sweat. *It hurts. Shizuma-oneesama, how could you?*

"...No..." she finally muttered. She had shaken off whatever was holding her voice captive.

"No... what?" Shizuma peered into Nagisa's face, her expression cold, and frightening. "You're trying to go against my wishes?"

Nagisa, terrified, covered her face. Her face reddened and her whole body shook violently.

"I didn't mean to. I'm sorry," Nagisa pleaded.

A voice called Shizuma from behind. "Shizuma-oneesama, we should go now." It was a sweet, childish voice.

Shizuma suddenly softened her expression as she turned around and answered, her voice gentle. "Oh, you've come for me already?"

Nagisa raised her face in astonishment, and looked in the direction of the voice. A little girl stood there, her face concealed by a light, peach-colored mist.

When did it turn so foggy? Nagisa scanned her surroundings. She had just been standing near the lake at the top of Astraea Hill. Suddenly, she was enveloped by white fog.

Oh gosh, I can't see where I'm going. Ah... she reached out, searching for Shizuma.

But Shizuma was no longer there.

Ahh... Nagisa's hand grasped thin air. She could just see Shizuma through the fog, far ahead of her.

How did she get so far away?

Shizuma held hands with the little girl. Though the two girls were far away, Nagisa could see Shizuma's soft, blissful smile. She whispered into the little girl's ear and chuckled.

Nagisa's chest tightened. *Why?* Her cry of agony was silent. The couple faded away into the distance.

No! I won't know what to do without Shizuma-oneesama...

Something painful pierced through Nagisa's heart. Her throat was dry, her head spun, and her eyes blurred until she couldn't see Shizuma anymore.

"Noooo!" Nagisa screamed. Nagisa closed her eyes, and felt something change. Shizuma, who was supposed to have disappeared, spoke directly into Nagisa's mind.

"Don't worry. I will protect you forever. I will be above the clouds looking after you. You must find happiness without me."

Nagisa opened her eyes, and a goddess stood before her. Large white wings grew from Shizuma's back. She floated just above Nagisa, looking down on her with the most divine smile as she gracefully flew away.

"No, don't do this to me!" Nagisa cried. "I cannot be happy without you!" Hot tears streamed from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

The heat from her tears jarred Nagisa awake.

Oh, it was a dream.

She lay in her bed in her room at the Strawberry Dorms. After wiping the tears from her face, she looked at her wet hands, dazed.

What a horrible dream. I am such a fool. I was the one who ran away from her. After that dream, I feel so much pain and remorse. My heart still aches, even when I'm fully awake.

Nagisa looked over to the window. The sky outside was getting lighter. She checked the bedside clock; it was five-thirty in the morning. She turned over in her bed, pulled up the blanket, and forced her eyes shut.

It was just a dream. I need to move on.

"Good morning, my dear Oneesamas. I brought some breakfast tea for you." The voice on the other side of the door was cheerful.

“Come in,” Tamao called. She looked at Nagisa to ask for approval. Nagisa nodded, and Chiyo entered the room. She wore the apron of a room assistant, and in her hands were a teapot and a small silver vase.

“I brought some herb tea and some *konpeito*⁴ for the tired Nagisa-oneesama.”

Chiyo smiled as she walked past them. Despite the fact that Nagisa and Tamao had just woken up and still wore their pajamas, she diligently opened the curtains and neatly tucked them at the sides, prepared some tea, and made their beds.

“Hey, don’t worry about that, I’ll do the beds myself.” Nagisa wasn’t used to the room assistant program—where the underclassmen of St. Miator were assigned to the room of an upperclassman in order to take care of their personal needs—so she didn’t feel comfortable having Chiyo do so much for her.

“Please, Nagisa-oneesama, I am obligated to perform these duties. And I would like to be of use. I am glad to serve Nagisa-oneesama.” Chiyo brought her cleaning rag to her blushing cheeks.

“Oh jeez, Chiyo-chan, don’t put a rag on your face,” Nagisa said, but Tamao found it amusing.

“Yes, Nagisa-chan, St. Miator’s program allows students to understand the intricacies of running a household, so you shouldn’t interfere. You know that many of the students here have maids at home, right? Without the program, they might never have a chance to do household chores. It is important to teach the students about the enjoyment of service.”

Chiyo smiled, looking proud.

Nagisa was surprised at the conversation between the two. *Oh, I wonder if Chiyo-chan comes from a large home? But, come to think of it, St. Miator probably has students from all kinds of influential families, like Shizuma-sama and Chiyo-chan.* She recalled the picture she had seen of the large Hanazono family ranch and compared it to her small, 4-bedroom house. Her humble background was embarrassing.

“So are you going to be the successor of your family, Chiyo-chan?” Tamao nonchalantly asked.

“I don’t think so. I have an older brother who will probably succeed. When I reach *genpuku*⁵ at age 15, the family will decide.”

“Oh, don’t you mean *mogi*⁶?” Tamao wondered.

“I am from a martial arts family,” Chiyo answered self-consciously.

Tamao quickly grasped what Chiyo was talking about. “So until a successor is decided upon, you’re treated like a boy, right, Chiyo-chan? But if you have an older brother, you may not have to succeed, eh? You won’t have to be the oldest female master.”

“Yes!” Chiyo happily replied.

Nagisa wiped her face with a towel, not having the faintest clue what they were talking about.

How weird. I thought it would be good to be the successor of a family. What a wasted opportunity. I mean, I’d probably succeed. Nagisa pondered as she stared at her puffy eyes in the mirror.

I hope this looks better. I guess it’s best to ice it, but I’d have to go all the way to the cafeteria to get the ice. I’m so stupid. Why did I cry over a dream? I mean, I don’t have any right to cry over Shizuma anymore.

She thought about her conversation last night with Mizuho in the sun room. She had said some unbelievable things. Shizuma hadn’t cared for Kaori much, or something like that.

Nagisa shook her head. *No way...*

But Mizuho had spoken softly and clearly, and gradually Nagisa became convinced.

“After Kaori’s tragic death, no one, especially Shizuma herself, would dare say this. But Shizuma didn’t really love Kaori. I know, because I was one of Shizuma’s closest friends. She really needs someone like you, Nagisa.”

But Nagisa just couldn’t believe what Mizuho said...

“Thank you for your kind words,” Nagisa had replied. “But I don’t need to know about it anymore. Whatever happened is over.”

Nagisa let the Mizuho’s words echo in her mind again. *Even if it was true, Shizuma wouldn’t forgive me for running away the way I did.*

It was morning, time for students to go to the schools on Astraea Hill. The maidens walked straight to the gates of the three schools, a sea of colorful green, white, and pink uniforms that decorated the summer hill like little blossoms.

Chikaru enjoyed the nervous tension that surrounded her as she walked to school with Shion.

“I’m so glad to bump into to you this morning, Shion-chan,” Chikaru said with a smile. She had caught sight of Shion as she was leaving the Strawberry Dorms. Shion was trudging along, shoulders slumped.

“Good morning, Shion-chan, fancy meeting you here,” Chikaru had said.

Shion had jumped, startled, and looked at Chikaru as if she were frightened of her. Chikaru tried not to be offended.

“You seem to be running a bit late today, aren’t you, Shion-chan?”

“Well, there’s no particular reason for that.” Shion spoke less than normal today, obviously depressed.

Chikaru felt bad for yanking Shion around with all her little schemes, but she hadn’t expected Shion to react like this. She thought Shion would come back at her with some wild reaction, like St. Miator President Rokujo. It would have made things exciting.

On the other hand, if she did overreact, maybe things will get worse. After all, it’s my fault for causing all this. Although Shion-chan is the Student Council president and quite intelligent, she is unable to hide her emotions. It’s adorable. She must be really depressed after Amane-chan’s disappearance. Tsk... Shion-chan is so bad at hiding her feelings. I’m surprised no one noticed Shion-chan’s depression. No, wait. Maybe Momomi-chan and Kaname-chan have seen it.

She glanced sideways at Shion. “Hey, Shion-chan, what is the third round event of the *Étoile* competition?”

Shion flinched as if she had been hit. Her brows furrowed. “I’m sorry, we haven’t finalized it yet.” She hid her face momentarily as she played with her bangs and adjusted her posture.

“My apologies. Though we had tentatively decided on an event for the third round, unexpected circumstances have affected our plans. But thanks to your gracious offer, Chikaru-sama, our Spica candidate, Kusanagi Makoto, and your candidate, Miss Byakudan Kagome, will more than likely take the crown, so I am not too concerned about the final event.” Shion’s expression changed to a cool and collected poker face. Even so, Shion was disgusted with the emptiness of her bluff.

Why should I be sorry? At this point, I don’t care anymore about the results of the Étoile competition.

Shion was surprised at the revelation, and her indifference towards the *Étoile* crown. Almost immediately, her guilty conscience stabbed her heart.

No. As the Spica Student Council President, I am supposed to bring the Étoile crown to Spica. So why do I not care about the competition? What was I working so hard for all this time?

Shion stood there, dazed, her mind a total blank.

Chikaru, knowing exactly what was on Shion’s mind, put on a sympathetic smile.

You’re doing fine, Shion-chan. An intelligent girl like you needs to face your feelings and become stronger for it. You need to acknowledge your own feelings and make your desires come true. Life is short. I want you to enjoy this brief but relaxing life as a maiden of this hill. You may not realize this yet, but the reason you don’t care about the Étoile is that Amane-chan is gone. You don’t want the Étoile crown for Spica, but rather, for Amane-chan. You want your most adored Amane-chan to shine as the best Étoile of Astraea.

Suddenly, Chikaru waved her hands in an exaggerated manner, pushing away the melancholy that had dropped over them.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Shion-chan. Umm...I shouldn’t be saying this because it was my idea in the first place, but...I’ve run into a problem.”

“Eh...a problem?” Shion was surprised again, and snapped out of her daze.

Chikaru hugged her bag to her chest. “Well, Kagome-chan isn’t really getting along with Makoto-chan.”

“Not getting along?” Shion asked.

“For some reason Kagome-chan and Makoto-chan aren’t compatible with each other. I know it’s a surprise, but I found out yesterday. Kagome-chan told me that because Makoto-chan doesn’t care about Mr. Teddy Bear, she no longer wants to be her partner.”

“M...Mr. Teddy...Bear?” Shion repeated, dumbfounded.

“Yes. Kagome-chan is a really good girl, but she is a bit unique, and can be a little difficult sometimes!” Chikaru let her bag fall back onto her shoulder as she clasped her hands together and stretched her arms out in front of her.

“But don’t worry. We only have one more round left in the competition, so I think she can hold on until then. After all, the reputations of Spica and Lulim are at stake. It’ll be fine if Makoto-chan can give her lots of candy and be more careful of Mr. Teddy Bear. That’s why I was curious as to what the third round event was going to be. I hope it’s not difficult.” Chikaru laughed nervously, as if she were anxious.

“Excuse me. Umm...may I see Yaya-oneesama?”

It was lunch break at the St. Spica Girls’ Institute, Third Year, Class *Un*. Tsubomi stood at the entrance to Yaya’s classroom. The student sitting nearest the door frowned and pointed to a desk near the window.

Sitting at the desk was a girl with long, jet black hair. She didn’t move. Her beautiful black hair hung down like a silk curtain, covering her face. It was hard to tell if she was awake or asleep.

“Is that her?” Tsubomi asked.

The upperclassmen chuckled at Tsubomi’s confused look. “Yes, that’s her. She’s been like that since morning. What a nuisance, she was like that during classes, too. The teachers eventually just ignored her. You know, we understand her loneliness after Konohana-san’s disappearance, but it’s really surprising for Yaya, usually full of pride, to be so openly depressed.”

Tsubomi’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Oh, I see.”

To completely collapse the way Yaya had was quite shameful in Astraea, and it was the first time Tsubomi had ever seen someone do it. No matter how upset a person could get, Yaya was probably the only person on the hill who would express her sadness so openly.

Yaya was pouting.

She’s being so blatant about it, too, Tsubomi thought. *Come to think of it, it is pretty amusing.*

She giggled in delight. “It is very much like Yaya-oneesama to act like that.”

The girl smiled, “Yes, absolutely. It is so Yaya.”

The two girls laughed. A Third Year student appeared beside Tsubomi. “It is rather funny, but please, cheer her up any way you can.” She patted Tsubomi’s shoulder.

“Leave it to me!” Tsubomi clenched her fists, committed to her task, and bounced into the classroom.

“Yaya-oneesama!” Tsubomi waved her hand and stomped towards Yaya.

The black curtain of hair slowly rustled. It moved, the light reflecting off of her beautiful locks. White skin peeked between the strands of hair.

Yaya-oneesama is beautiful as ever, Tsubomi thought. “Gosh, please get up already, Yaya-oneesama! You shouldn’t be taking a nap at a time like this.”

Yaya’s head snapped up. It didn’t seem like she was sleeping at all when she spoke. “Hey, why are you here? I didn’t ask for you, Tsubomi.”

Tsubomi flinched in the face of Yaya’s anger, but she wouldn’t give up.

“Yaya-oneesama, I know what’s bugging you. You want to know about Hikari-oneesama and Amane-sama, don’t you?”

Yaya’s gaze shifted away. “No, why should I...” *Care about them...* Yaya started to say, but she stopped herself before the words escaped. She grabbed Tsubomi’s shoulders.

“Don’t tell me you know where they are?” Yaya’s face went pale.

Tsubomi was overwhelmed by her sudden change, but managed to reply. “Sorry, no! I’m good at picking up news, but not that fast!” She stuck her tongue out. “Actually, you probably know more than I, since you were called into the sister’s office.”

“Hmph. Don’t get ahead of yourself. The sister didn’t tell me anything. She drilled *us* with questions instead. If I knew anything about those two, I wouldn’t be so jealous right now,” Yaya folded her arms. She was about 15 centimeters taller than Tsubomi though Yaya was only two years older. Tsubomi looked up, envious of the difference in height.

Tsubomi persevered. “Oh gosh, Yaya-oneesama, you totally missed your chance to get information from the teachers.”

Then Yaya understood Tsubomi’s sudden appearance. *Oh, so Tsubomi is here to find out what happened to me yesterday.* Disappointed, she slumped back into her chair.

“President Shion was completely rattled, so I was counting on Yaya-oneesama to fill me in or something,” Tsubomi mumbled.

Yaya collapsed onto her desk again. *I’m so tired of everything.*

“Umm, Yaya-oneesama, didn’t you ask the sister *anything* back in the faculty room? This morning, President Shion looked so depressed. Well, it’s only natural for her to feel depressed, because she worked so hard to put Amane-sama into the *Étoile* competition. So I totally understand President Shion to be shocked over Amane-sama and Hikari-oneesama’s disappearance. But she acted so strange in this morning’s staff meeting. I mean, she let Kiyashiki-san run the meeting, and Shion didn’t say a word. The other council members said they’ve never seen her like this before. But since it’s Spica’s turn to manage the

Étoile competition, we have to run the third round without fail. We don't know what to do with a president who has turned into a lifeless shell, so I'm so worried."

Yaya didn't respond, but repeated Tsubomi's words in her mind. *Lifeless shell, huh? I'm probably the same. Now that my beloved Hikari is no longer here, my soul is like an empty shell.*

She loathed herself for thinking that way. *I should have taken her, body and soul.* She coiled her hair around her finger.

Tsubomi hesitated before she spoke again. "Yaya-oneesama, are you sure you don't know their whereabouts? I mean, you were so close to Hikari-oneesama, so a lot of council members assumed you had to know something."

If I knew something, I'd tell everyone in a heartbeat, Yaya thought. She ran her tongue over her teeth.

"Tsubomi, just shut up. I'm going to sleep." Yaya buried her face in the desk and stopped moving.

"Oh for pity's sake, Yaya-oneesama!" Tsubomi's face turned red with anger and she stomped her feet as she left Yaya's classroom, even though she understood Yaya's feelings.

Hikari-oneesama and Amane-sama, please come back to Spica soon. Everyone is waiting for your return.

"Oh, Princess Nagisa...are you on cleanup duty again? Must be hard being Cinderella," said Iohata Momiji, Nagisa's classmate, as she opened the classroom door, smiled, then waved her hand and left.

With a triangular bandanna covering her head, Nagisa grinned dryly as she watched her classmate leave. Because Nagisa selfishly withdrew from the *Étoile* competition, she was assigned classroom cleanup duties alone, for a week, as punishment.

St. Miator Girls' Academy, Fourth Year Moon Class's classroom was cheery, with girls scurrying to leave, anticipating a fun time after school. Nagisa

hesitantly moved her broom back and forth, trying to avoid the girls' eyes as they left the room.

Tamao noticed Nagisa's misery and deliberately took her time packing up. When the classroom was half-empty, Tamao looked Nagisa in the eye.

Nagisa laughed in embarrassment.

Tamao was miffed at her classmates. *Nagisa-chan, you had your reasons for withdrawing from the Étoile competition. Everyone isn't aware of your true motives, so they just accused you of leaving a black mark on the honorable history of St. Miator Girls' Academy, or whatever.*

If that was the case, Shizuma was just as guilty, but only Nagisa had been punished for dropping out of the Étoile competition.

Nagisa always shook off such comments, protecting Shizuma. "It's all my fault this happened," she said over and over. "Not Shizuma-oneesama's."

Tamao did not care much for warped feelings of love. *Nagisa-chan, you're such a fool. If you loved Shizuma, why did you withdraw? If you had enough courage to take the blows for the person you love, then why didn't you use that courage to confront Shizuma-oneesama about Kaori?*

Tamao couldn't help but think like that. *Nagisa hadn't been herself since the morning after Prince Amate's disqualification. Then she tried to leave school without telling anyone.*

If she loves Shizuma-sama so much, she should just tell her.

That's so unlike you, Nagisa-chan, to keep things inside. Sigh. But I suppose if you did that, you'd probably cause trouble for her.

A wicked thought crossed Tamao's mind. *I'm so mean. I told Nagisa-chan to forget Shizuma-sama, even though I knew Nagisa's true feelings. I guess I'm the one who's holding Nagisa back from talking to Shizuma.*

Tamao's shoulders heaved with her sigh. *But if Nagisa-chan mustered some courage and expressed her feelings to Shizuma-sama, I'd have no chance at winning Nagisa's heart.*

Tamao bit her lip. *It's been a while since I felt so hopeless. When did I start to*

feel so seriously about her? Tamao used to run from things that required too much effort or that had the potential to hurt her heart. Suddenly she was angry with Nagisa.

What had started out as a little desire to play with the new transfer student had changed, after seeing Nagisa jump into the *Étoile* competition shortly upon her arrival. Despite Shizuma's overbearing presence, Nagisa's pure heart prevented her from feeling bitter towards anyone, and she was so simple and honest that tea and cakes made her forget her worries in an instant.

Tamao's anger ebbed when she realized she truly loved Nagisa's strength.

Please don't change, Nagisa, Tamao thought. She wanted to protect Nagisa from the overbearing Shizuma. Tamao was sure her love would be noticed by Nagisa one day. Instead of burning out from Shizuma's wavering feelings, it was better for Nagisa to be with her.

Watching Nagisa cleaning, seeing her suffering, Tamao's desire mounted, and she wanted Nagisa. She remembered Nagisa's sad face yesterday when she announced that she wouldn't think about Shizuma-sama anymore.

I want Nagisa-chan to love me. Tamao realized. *But I don't want her to resent me for keeping her from Shizuma-sama. It's too early for her to see Shizuma-sama just yet.*

Tamao imagined Shizuma, like a grim reaper, sweeping Nagisa away before her eyes. She shook her head in denial. *I refuse to give up my precious Persephone to Hades.*

A voice broke through Tamao's thoughts. "You shouldn't go easy on her, okay? You and Shizuma-sama were too lenient on her and look what happened." Tamao turned her head toward the voice. Another student had approached Tamao, a stern look on her face.

"I know I shouldn't," replied Tamao. "But now that Nagisa-chan has withdrawn from the *Étoile* competition, she won't be meeting Shizuma-sama anymore, so there's no reason to be mad at her, I think." She smiled.

The student, taken aback at the reply, responded, "Well... I guess you're right," She looked at Nagisa sympathetically. Nagisa noticed Tamao and the

other student looking at her, and started to fidget uncomfortably.

“I suppose if she gets through this week, everyone will warm up to her again. Nagisa-san, try to tough it out, okay?” The student smiled.

Nagisa cautiously returned the smile and nodded. Tamao sneaked a quick wink, and moved her mouth silently, so that only Nagisa could see.

I-will-help-with-cleanup.

Nagisa’s shoulders relaxed in relief. *Great! Tamao-chan, you’re so nice.* She had noticed Tamao’s angry face a few moments before, but now her heart jumped. *When we return to the Strawberry Dorms, I need to thank Tamao-chan! Cakes and tea are okay, but it’s always on her tab. Oh, maybe I can give her a massage? Tamao-chan probably likes massages, since she always massages me. Okay, today, I’ll...*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the classroom doorknob rattling behind her. She turned her head to see who was entering, and a tingle ran down her spine. She knew in her heart that something special was about to happen.

Tamao’s body froze, and there was a feeling like a large wave crashing against her. A black, ominous presence. She caught sight of the person entering the room and her expression turned dark. She stood and rushed to jump in front of Nagisa, trying to protect her from the presence in the doorway. Tamao spread her arms out to block Nagisa’s view.

Nagisa tried to look around Tamao, but couldn’t get a clear view of the newcomer.

Tamao confronted the intruder. “Why are you here?”

It was the first time Nagisa heard Tamao speak so coldly. The air in the room turned so tense it pressed against them.

Nagisa, suddenly afraid, had no idea what was going on. She didn’t want to know.

“Goodness, such pleasant greetings, Tamao-chan.”

Nagisa heard the voice, a voice she didn’t want to hear. Her heart tugged

painfully, and the back of her throat burned. She was suddenly dizzy.

“Shizuma-oneesama...” Tamao said in a low voice, trying not to let Nagisa hear the name. She glanced over her shoulder to check on Nagisa, then declared, “You have no reason to come to this class anymore!”

Shizuma was taken aback by Tamao’s bravado, but she recovered quickly with a brilliant smile.

“Oh, that’s not true.” She took one step towards Tamao, then another.

Nagisa’s body began to shake violently. *Shizuma’s going to yell at me.* She couldn’t face Shizuma; she was terrified.

What should I do? Shizuma-oneesama must be really mad that I withdrew without telling her first. My mind was made up then, but how could I tell Shizuma-sama?

Oh gosh, I’m so stupid. I should have left Astraea when I had the chance.

The classroom fell silent. Shizuma stopped in her tracks.

Ohh... she’s almost here... Nagisa, red-faced, hid behind Tamao and closed her eyes. *She will probably just pull me out of here...*

The next moment...

“Tamao, thank you. I am relieved that you’re here to protect her,” Shizuma stated cheerfully.

Nagisa felt Tamao’s body relax for a moment and brush up against her. The next moment, Tamao’s body moved away as Shizuma’s arms wrapped around Tamao’s hips and pulled her close, leaving Nagisa completely exposed.

Surprised, Nagisa looked up at Tamao, as if she was asking for Tamao’s help. She inadvertently caught Shizuma out of the corner of her eye.

What in the world? Tamao was confused by Shizuma’s sudden action.

Shizuma suddenly kissed Tamao on the mouth. To keep Tamao confused, she kissed her for three whole seconds.

What the? Shizuma-sama, no...

Tamao pushed Shizuma away with full force. Shizuma’s lips were wet, like

peach-colored coral.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Tamao yelled.

Shizuma grinned slyly. “Oh, it was for old time’s sake. After all, this isn’t the first time we’ve done this, remember?” she said playfully.

“But! That was a really long time ago!” Tamao blurted out before she remembered Nagisa was still standing there.

If she knew about what had happened between us in the past, she’d never speak to me again.

But Nagisa had witnessed everything. Shizuma had taken Tamao and showered her with love.

Tamao tried to explain. “Nagisa-chan, it’s not like that! This is Shizuma-sama’s sick joke! She’s trying to get back at me because I’m trying to protect you from her.” She tried her best to convince Nagisa, but Nagisa just stood there with a blank look on her face.

Shizuma added the final blow. Standing sideways, without looking at Nagisa, she said in a low, cold, extremely serious voice.

“Nagisa...”

Tears welled in Nagisa’s eyes.

“I understand your decision, so I will no longer be a nuisance to you.”

A teardrop rolled down Nagisa’s face.

“Goodbye. It’s time to bid farewell.”

Shizuma said the words, though they were like a knife to her heart. She turned on her heel.

“Sorry for bothering you. Please excuse me. Take care, Nagisa.”

With her back towards them, Shizuma left the room like the wind.

Shizuma’s words echoed in Nagisa’s ears.

It’s time to bid farewell...

Take care, Nagisa...

Her last words were completely generic, something that an upperclassmen—no, the campus queen—would say to a random underclassmen.

Shizuma-sama... Nagisa didn't even bother to wipe the tears from her cheeks as she fell to her knees.

Ding dong...

The bells of Astraea tolled in the distance. It was time to leave school.

Ding dong...

The warning for the first dismissal bell rang. At St. Lulim Girls' School, the closest school to the Strawberry Dorms, a white-uniformed Spica student, Kusanagi Makoto, stood at its gate.

She leaned against one of the gate's large brick columns, looking bored as she waited for someone. A large crowd of Lulim students admired her from a distance.

"Look...that's Spica's little Emperor..."

"Up close, she has such a beautiful face..."

"She looks great in Spica's miniskirt, almost like a handsome boy..."

The little whispers and gasps Makoto heard half-annoyed, half-pleased her. They felt a bit strange, if she was honest about it. Unlike Spica students, who passionately adored her, the students at St. Lulim's calmly enjoyed their chance to see Astraea's new idol.

Makoto had suddenly felt the urge to look at Lulim's campus this morning. *Because Chika attends this place, I needed to see it for myself. This school has quite a unique atmosphere...oh, there she is!*

She took a little step and ran towards a little girl with curly hair. Makoto's steps were light, almost a prance. When she finally reached the curly-haired girl, she stopped in front of her and kneeled before her.

"Good day, my princess. I have a little gift for you today."

Makoto presented the little girl with a bouquet. The semi-transparent flowers

were made of beautifully-colored candy, with shiny, colorful wrapping paper filled with chocolate clusters in between. Makoto had carefully researched all of Kagome's favorites.

Kagome smelled the sweet aroma wafting towards her. "Wow, what pretty candy flowers!"

Without acknowledging Makoto at all, Kagome plucked one candy flower and gave it to a surprised Kizuna, who stood beside her.

"Here. This one is for Kizuna-oneesama."

Kizuna was doubly surprised, but not as surprised as Makoto. Then Kagome plucked another flower and gave it to Remon, who stood next to Kizuna.

"Here. This one is for Remon-oneesama."

Makoto finally lost her cool. "Hey, what is the little princess thinking? This is my present to you—" She poked her head out from underneath the bouquet.

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

Kagome, finally noticing Makoto, gave out a blood-curdling yell.

No, no... She shook her head, and dove behind Kizuna. She hid her face in fear and shook, her teddy bear clutched to her chest.

Kizuna hastily picked up the bouquet Kagome had dropped and thanked Makoto.

"Kagome-chan was just taken by surprise, but I'm sure she'll thank you later, Makoto-sama."

Makoto clicked her tongue, irritated. *She's so difficult, and becoming really annoying. What doesn't she like about me? Chika chose her to be my partner, but why do I have to stoop down and cater to this girl?*

Chikaru stood in the distance, watching Makoto and the girls, witnessing Kagome's display. She sighed deeply.

I guess I have no choice.

"I think it's good you said that," Hitomi said. She turned and looked out of a

glass window so clear it seemed a breath might pass right through it. The night sky outside was already dark with a quiet Maiden Park below.

In one of the upperclassmen's rooms, on the Miator side of the Strawberry Dorms, Togi Hitomi and Kano Mizuho—publicly and privately known as Hanazono Shizuma's closest friends—were deep in discussion after dinner.

Mizuho, the main resident of the room, responded. "But Nagisa might still be misunderstanding some things." The soft, orange light illuminated Mizuho's gentle face, which looked worried.

Hitomi's turned away from the window, her expression serious. "True...she didn't listen to my story to the end. I'll admit she may have prematurely withdrawn because of my partial explanation."

"But after you explained, didn't she have a talk with Shizuma-sama? I recall Shizuma-sama mentioning that she tried to explain things to Nagisa, without lying. So I think Nagisa's decision to withdraw from the *Étoile* competition was completely her own. In her mind, if she couldn't believe in herself, there was no possible way she could continue to be with Shizuma-sama. Those who aren't sure of themselves have no right to be with Shizuma-sama," Hitomi's last speech came out more passionately than she had intended.

Mizuho dropped her head and sat in the chair that leaned against the wall, staring at the white lace of her uniform. "Nagisa-chan is a sweet, honest girl. But as a transfer student, she should have been given more time to adjust to the environment of St. Miator Girls' Academy. I would say that confident people, like you and Shizuma-sama, are rare indeed. To think, the first person Nagisa encountered was Shizuma-sama! It must have been a huge shock. I believe she tried her best to adjust to her new situation."

"Tried her best? What do you mean?" Hitomi took a sip of dark, bitter coffee, and scrunched her face.

Mizuho smiled at Hitomi's reaction. "Of course, she tried her best for Shizuma-sama. I only spoke to Nagisa-chan briefly, but she seemed really honest and caring. I could tell just by looking at her. She's the type of girl who would wish for Shizuma-sama's happiness over her own."

"Well, I wish for the same myself," Hitomi shot back.

“Tsk. Gosh, Hitomi, of course I feel the same as you, too. After being with Shizuma-sama for such a long time, I know all about Kaori and the first *Étoile* competition, and how Shizuma-sama hasn’t been herself recently. We both know it all too well.”

Hitomi nodded. “That’s true...”

“But Nagisa’s life has been in turmoil since she arrived. She met Shizuma-sama the same day she came here, then not long after she was thrown into the fire because of Shizuma-sama,” said Mizuho.

“Are you saying that the *Étoile* competition is a fire?” Hitomi tried to protest, but Mizuho calmed her down.

“She had just come to Astraea in April, you know? I really think she didn’t want to enter the *Étoile* competition in the first place, especially if her partner was Shizuma-sama. And I heard that she was bullied quite a bit as a result. Hitomi, don’t you know what happened during the first round, ‘Mouth of Truth’?”

Hitomi flinched, but said nothing. Mizuho waited for a moment, and then continued.

“Just before that event, Nagisa-chan was called to the library, where she discovered the facts about Kaori. It was a cruel trick. I was there when she found out, so I know how hurt she was. Shizuma-sama is a wonderful person, and she smothered Nagisa-chan with love. She must have felt like she was flying, and finding out about Kaori like that must have been like cold water being dumped on her. It was really sad to see. Nobody can blame her for loving and being loved by Shizuma-sama. Think about Kaori. Kaori was oblivious to her surroundings, because she could only see Shizuma-sama. She didn’t pay attention to all the jealous people around her, and continued to profess her love to Shizuma-sama openly and honestly. That was one of her good points, but I believe Shizuma-sama was a bit troubled by it. She tried to protect Kaori from all the negativity, but...”

Mizuho’s cheeks relaxed, and she smiled.

“Nagisa-chan is so reserved, and though she had become the center of Shizuma-sama’s—the campus queen’s—attention, she was so apologetic to

everyone over it. Which turned her into a perfect target for bullying. I think she really wanted to withdraw as soon as possible. But she couldn't give up Shizuma-sama so easily. Because..."

Hitomi couldn't resist cutting in on Mizuho's explanation.

"Of course! No one would want to let go of Shizuma-sama if she smothered them with love. She's got some sort of magic charm!" Hitomi admitted.

Mizuho chuckled. "I agree, she does have a spell-binding quality. You and I are great examples."

Hitomi blushed.

"But Nagisa-chan is different. Hitomi, haven't you noticed it, too? I know you have; you just haven't admitted it yet."

Hitomi looked off to the side. She gulped down the rest of the coffee and almost cried from its bitterness.

"After hearing Kaori's story, Nagisa-chan probably wanted to heal Shizuma-sama's wounds. So she chose to stay by Shizuma-sama's side, even though it upset her to do so."

"Yeah, I knew that already," Hitomi huffed.

"We feel we can help Shizuma-sama because she doesn't consider us to be her lovers, but good friends. With all due respect, of course."

"Yeah..." Hitomi's voice grew smaller.

"But Nagisa-chan could have been even more jealous of Kaori if she wanted to. And she should have confronted Shizuma-sama, told her to choose between her and Kaori. I'm sure Shizuma-sama would have easily chosen Nagisa over Kaori, but it would have been torture for Shizuma-sama, and Nagisa would never want that. After Kaori's death, Shizuma-sama pondered whether her feelings for Kaori were true or not. She might have even felt guilty or lost some confidence in herself."

The two girls fell silent.

Hitomi swallowed deeply and looked at Mizuho. Mizuho, who was as calm and gentle as a *Bosatsu*⁷.

“So you had the same thought as me, Mizuho?”

“Yes.”

“I have my regrets.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I shouldn’t have introduced Kaori to Shizuma-sama.”

Mizuho didn’t respond.

“What I did was to cause grief for both of them, and troubled Shizuma-sama in the end. And this time, I pulled another girl into this mess.”

Mizuho tried to comfort Hitomi. “That’s not true. Nobody knew Kaori had such a short life ahead of her. ”

Hitomi, on the verge of tears, nodded.

“Hitomi, you must have had a hard time, also.” Mizuho patted Hitomi’s shoulder.

Hitomi could barely speak, her voice trembled so badly. “...I...I didn’t go through...anything...”

Mizuho sat on the bed next to Hitomi.

“At least Kaori found happiness.”

“Are you sure?” Hitomi looked down and sniffled.

Mizuho brought Hitomi’s head into her chest. “Deep down Kaori knew Shizuma-sama’s heart was not hers.”

Hitomi was speechless.

“But I believe Kaori was happy enough. Just being with Shizuma-sama dispelled all her fears about dying so young.”

Hitomi finally chuckled. “Gee, what a great way to look at things.”

“She had such a pure, innocent soul, and was sent to heaven at such an early age. She was so different from Nagisa-chan. Kaori was a young girl with an angel’s attitude.”

“Absolutely.” Hitomi rested her head on Mizuho’s shoulder and thought about

Kaori.

Mizuho was gentle, but continued to explain things bluntly. “Shizuma-sama probably needs someone like Nagisa-chan.”

“You may be right.” Hitomi nodded. “There aren’t many underclassmen who would want to save Shizuma-sama.” She laughed and sniffled.

Mizuho did not join Hitomi in laughter. “She never asked—not even once—to have Shizuma-sama all to herself. Any girl with Shizuma-sama would feel insecure. They would doubt that they are worthy of being with Shizuma-sama. And they would naturally express their insecurities to Shizuma-sama. Several times, at least, which would annoy Shizuma-sama. But Nagisa-chan was different. She chose to part with Shizuma-sama. She must have misunderstood something. Or maybe she refrained from asking, thinking that Shizuma-sama really didn’t need her.”

Suddenly, Hitomi burst into laughter.

“Gee, Mizuho, you like Nagisa, don’t you?”

Mizuho blushed in embarrassment. “Well, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Don’t worry, I know. I like her, too. She’s a very sweet and bright.” Hitomi continued, “We are both wrapped around Shizuma-sama’s finger, aren’t we? She owes us a lot.”

Hitomi patted Mizuho’s head once, and stood. She faced Mizuho, and raised her hand. “I put in one vote for supporting Nagisa-chan. I still think those two want to be together, after all.”

Chapter 4

How the King of Truth Became Known

It was way past bedtime, a quiet midnight in the Strawberry Dorms. In her Spica dorm room, Yaya fell asleep, alone again.

Gracious, how many days has it been...one, two...she counted in her head. How many days since Hikari went missing? About six days already. Almost a whole week. I never expected this to happen.

She glanced across the room at Hikari's empty bed. The wrinkle-free, light peach satin cover seemed dull and solemn.

Until now, I never felt so lonely being in a room by myself.

Yaya pulled her futon cover over her head. *I should stop thinking about anything, or I'll never get to sleep. I'm so tired.*

The little emergency light was turned off, making the room completely dark. The only sound was Yaya's breathing. She tried to fight back the tears that welled inside her. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep.

Yaya dreamed of Hikari. She wore a short, white, robe like an angel, smiling shyly at Yaya. She stretched her hand out to Yaya, inviting Yaya to take Hikari in her arms. Tempted, Yaya took her hand, and brought Hikari close.

Hikari gasped as she sank against Yaya's chest. Yaya stamped out all her fears and hugged Hikari as tightly as she could, nearly crushing her bones.

"Hikari," she whispered.

Hikari, wearing a glowing smile, buried her face into Yaya's bosom. Yaya couldn't hold herself back anymore. She ran her hands all over Hikari's body, reaching for every part of her, over and over, as if she wanted to confirm that Hikari was really in her arms. She kissed Hikari's lips relentlessly, as if trying to make up for all the time she couldn't kiss her. Yaya kissed her so hard she ran out of breath. After a brief release she kissed her again.

The moment their lips parted, Yaya felt insecure, as if Hikari would disappear, and so she began her kissing again. She kissed Hikari's lips, cheeks, neck. Her breasts. Then explored every part of Hikari's body with kisses.

Hikari, lost in ecstasy, let Yaya take control.

Yaya peeled off Hikari's clothing. Hikari shivered in anticipation.

"Hikari, you're so beautiful." Yaya was captivated by Hikari's white, alluring skin. It drew Yaya to her lover, like a spell.

Yaya made love to Hikari.

Hikari, lost in ecstasy, whispered into Yaya's ear. *Ohh...Yaya-chan...Yaya-chan...* She writhed in Yaya's arms, burning with passion so hot she nearly melted Yaya in the process.

"Oh, Hikari. My Hikari. Please tell me that you only love me."

Yaya rubbed her body against Hikari, breathing heavily and asking the question again and again. Hikari arched her back and moaned with pleasure. *Ahh, Yaya-chan...*

But she never answered Yaya's question.

Hikari reached her climax. She clutched Yaya's body, and her moan was like honey to Yaya's ears.

Yes, that's it, come with me, Hikari...

Yaya poured all her love into Hikari, and the two girls reached the end of the earth together. Yaya was intoxicated on the feeling that she and Hikari were the only people on earth.

Hikari relaxed and closed her eyes, her body glowing with the pleasure of what Yaya had given her.

Suddenly, a halo rolled down from the top of Hikari's head.

Yaya hadn't noticed the golden circlet above Hikari before. It was the halo of an angel who had appeared on Earth. The halo glowed white for an instant, then melted into nothing.

Ahhhh, no, Hikari! Yaya cried. She had been filled with happiness just moments before, but she was now completely empty. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks.

With a gasp, Yaya opened her eyes and saw the darkness. She wiped her cheeks, surprised by the tears she found there. She looked down at her hands. The sensation of Hikari's body lingered in her trembling hands, but Yaya sighed with relief. *I'm glad it was just a dream. Thank goodness I didn't go all the way with Hikari like that. I really don't want to do that to her. I mean, I'd probably be happy if I did make love to her, but...*

A smile slowly crept onto Yaya's face. With tear-soaked cheeks, she felt indescribable happiness. She laughed, carefree.

Yes, what I want the most is not to make love to her.

I want to be Hikari's best friend.

Again the sun rose on Astraea Hill.

One week had passed since the second round of the *Étoile* competition, and each school was different than it had been just seven days before.

At the St. Miator Girls' Academy, the rumor that Shizuma had dumped Nagisa faded into the background. Nagisa's life had settled into an almost comfortable lull. She no longer felt like she wanted to leave school.

Shizuma withdrew from the *Étoile* competition, and like many other Sixth Year students, didn't appear in public too often anymore.

Nagisa just went with the flow of everyday life. What Shizuma did to Tamao on that last day was a little shocking, but what she had said to Tamao was even more shocking. Shizuma's final word to Nagisa was the biggest shock of all.

Goodbye...

Nagisa refused to think about it. Whenever she tried to think of the reason for it, her heart tightened and her mind went blank.

I should just forget everything. I won't think about Shizuma-sama ever again.

Tamao didn't bring up the subject either, so between the two of them, it was like that final meeting had never happened. Since then, Nagisa spent her unbelievably pleasant days with Tamao always by her side.

At St. Spica Girls' Institute, Makoto was still the flamboyant Emperor. She had won the second round of the *Étoile* competition. Things were slowly approaching their conclusion. Amane and Hikari had not been seen since their disappearance, but the teachers and Sisters acted like nothing had happened. Students, possibly feeling guilty that they had excessively pressured the two girls, found it hard to bring up the subject.

Originally, Amane's hard-core fans, the Amane-wannabees, had caused a ruckus—thinking that Amane and Hikari would eventually be expelled from school—but once they realized that their commotion might prevent their prince's return, they changed their minds and waited patiently in silence. Everyone believed the two girls would eventually come back.

Finally, at the St. Lulim Girls' School, Student Council President Minamoto Chikaru smiled like the Madonna and enjoyed the day at her Costume Club. Chikaru's smile was for Kagome, who wore an overly frilly nurse's outfit.

"Hey, do you really refuse to enter the third round with Makoto-chan?"

"Yes," Kagome replied immediately, smiling, while she snuggled her teddy bear.

Chikaru sighed.

In this brief time of peace, only the Spica Student Council worried about the final round of the *Étoile* competition.

Lunch break. On the Spica campus, in the Spica Student Council Room, at the highest floor of the tower far beyond the throngs of girls clamoring in the cafeteria, the Student Council members waited nervously for something to arrive. President Shion, still completely depressed, sat with Kaname and Momomi, who were both nervous. All three waited patiently. The rest of the council members became nervous as well, and there was not a sound to be

heard. If someone looked up from the green expanse of the Maiden Park, the only things they would see through the large glass windows were the back sides of white uniforms quietly sitting at the table.

Knock, knock, knock...

Shion clenched her fist. *Here we go. It's time for me to take responsibility and get impeached.*

"Excuse me..."

The St. Lulim Student Council President, Minamoto Chikaru, and the St. Miator Student Council President, Rokujo Miyuki, entered the room. Their three key staff members followed behind. The two presidents wore business-like smiles, which was not unexpected. Today was a day for business. Today was the periodic Tri-School Joint Student Council meeting.

"Welcome, and thank you for coming." Shion stood, spreading her arms to welcome the guests inside, but her trembling hands were clamped shut. *Hang in there...*

The agenda for today's joint council meeting was to cover the results of the second round of the *Étoile* competition, and to discuss what event to conduct in the third round.

"Regarding the second round," Shion began once everyone was seated. "Spica's first round winners, the Amane pair, were disqualified. They broke cardinal school rules, and left school without authorization."

It was a major embarrassment for Shion to announce such shameful results. But, since she was in the highest position of power, she had to endure this shame. Once it was over, she needed to figure out the best way to decide on the third round.

Somehow I must bear this trial and restore Spica's glory.

The overwhelming pressure made her dizzy. Shion couldn't bear to look Chikaru and Miyuki in the eyes.

"Well, so, let's begin. First, I would like to report on the execution and results of the second round of the *Étoile* competition. Please review the handout."

Shion tried to control her shaking voice as the handouts were passed around the room, and the Tri-School Joint Student Council meeting began.

Shion reported the *Petite couronne* winners of the second round: St. Spica Girls' Institute, Fifth Year, Class *Trois*, Kusanagi Makoto, and St. Lulim Girls' School, First Year, Class C, Byakudan Kagome.

"We've tentatively scheduled a coronation ceremony for after the commotion at the schools has simmered down. Unfortunately, the second round had resulted in several disqualifications and withdrawals, but it did end smoothly so regarding the third and final round..."

Shion flew through the report rather quickly, thankful the job was nearly over.

"I object." Miyuki interjected and raised her hand.

"Huh?" Shion stopped. *Well...here it comes.* "Yes, what is it, St. Miator Girls' Academy President Rokujo?"

Miyuki kept her gaze on the table top as she stood, then snapped her face up to stare at Shion. "President Tomori, you state it all so simply, but how are we going to deal with the disappearance of the winners of the first round, St. Spica Girls' Institute's Otori Amane – Konohana Hikari pair?"

Urk... Shion nearly choked, but tried to regain her composure. *It's okay...calm down. This line of questioning was expected,* Shion reminded herself.

"Regarding that case, I express my deepest apologies. Our school is to blame. I acknowledge that this act was incredibly dishonorable and unprecedented, but since the couple has already received due punishment for being disqualified from the first half of the second round, "The Faceless Devil," I do not believe further corrective actions are required." Shion said it all with her eyes closed.

Yes, there's no other way to explain this situation. How much more should Spica suffer from this tragedy? There is no other penalty that could hurt Spica more than losing Amane.

Miyuki countered, "That is not what I meant. I understand that the two students were duly punished. It would have been understandable if they had only broken the rules with the framework of "The Faceless Devil," but they also went missing from school, causing a major uproar, on the day they were

supposed to participate in the latter event of the second round. Do you not think their actions were both unforgivable and dishonorable for Astraea?”

Urk... This time Shion was really stuck for a reply. Miyuki continued to pile it on.

“In fact, the couple in question won the first round, and was in the running for the final crown. They had the potential to be Astraea’s best and hold a very honorable position.”

Yes, that’s true... Shion thought. *Why did Amane make such a foolish decision to leave school?*

“So why did the two students make such a selfish decision to leave school?” Miyuki’s continued as if she could read Shion’s mind. “Shouldn’t the Spica Student Council have made sure that a strong couple, who dominated the first round in such an impressive manner, be monitored to prevent such an incident in the first place?”

Oh...so that’s where she’s going...

Shion spoke carefully, hiding her anger. “Are you suggesting, President Rokujo, that punitive measures be taken against the Spica Student Council itself?”

What in the world will that accomplish? Is she suggesting that I resign from my presidency?

When Miyuki did not answer, Shion snickered. “If my resignation would undo this mess, I would have done so instantly. But even if I stepped down, there’s no guarantee that the two girls would return, so I believe I should stay on until this whole situation is resolved.”

She thought about Shizuma. *If that’s your argument, St. Miator Girls’ Academy had a couple drop out as well.* “And how about the situation at the St. Miator Girls’ Academy? The previous *Étoile* jumped into the competition at the last minute, only to drop out prematurely. Isn’t your school just as guilty of stirring up the *Étoile* competition?”

Miyuki continued her argument without changing her expression. “Yes, of course. I am ready to take responsibility for the trouble my fellow students have

caused. That is why I am proposing a course of action.”

Shion narrowed her eyes. *Eh...what do you mean...?*

Miyuki spread her arms and shrugged her shoulders. “In other words, I just wanted to say there’s no point in continuing the *Étoile* competition.” She gave Shion an evil grin.

“Look, I will somehow convince the previous *Étoile* to re-enter the competition. So it would be great if everyone at Spica can find Amane-sama and Konohana-san to have them re-enter the competition, also. With the first and second place winners of the first round dropping out the way they did, all of the students who had high hopes for those two couples were utterly disappointed. They turned the competition into a big joke. Besides, there aren’t any couples who have charisma like those two couples, so I’m suggesting we redo the second round once they all return.” Miyuki spoke rather frankly.

Shion sat back in her chair, astonished. “B-But even if we both agree to that, President Miyuki, what about Lulim?” She looked at Chikaru.

Chikaru was laughing in amusement.

“Yes, Lulim probably won’t agree to redo the second round, especially since one of their students won the *Petite couronne*.”

But despite the way the conversation had gone, Miyuki pulled out the final ace up her sleeve.

“Yes, regarding that...unfortunately, I came across a ‘rumor’ that I feel I must report here.” Miyuki gave a sidelong glance to Chikaru, who was still chuckling.

“The subject in question is Kusanagi Makoto, who entered from the second round and came out as winner. It is a fact that she is the younger sister of Kusanagi Masaki, the legendary *Étoile* from nine years ago, correct?”

Everyone in the room was shocked into silence. Shion looked like she had tasted something bitter. Chikaru maintained her smile, which only convinced Miyuki that she was getting close to the heart of the matter.

“When I researched Kusanagi Masaki I came across an interesting fact.” Miyuki waved the file in question. “What I have here is a report about Kusanagi

Masaki, compiled by the former Miator Student Council. According to this report, there are no graduation records for the legendary *Étoile*, Kusanagi Masaki. And in addition, there are hints of her dropping out of school.”

Commotion spread throughout the room.

Dropping out of school? An Astraea student, dropping out?

Miyuki sensed the confusion in the room and lifted the report a little higher. “The main reason for her dropping out was probably due to her sudden disappearance.”

Shion jolted in her seat. *This is unexpected.*

Miyuki continued, “The reason for her disappearance appears to be related to the secret behind the birth of her sister, Kusanagi Makoto—”

Chikaru stood suddenly, causing a lot of noise. She spoke loud enough to drown out Miyuki’s last words.

“Umm... President Miyuki? I truly apologize for interrupting you during your explanation, but...”

What now? Miyuki looked upset.

Chikaru didn’t seem to notice and rattled on. “It seems like the Spica and Miator councils are really concerned about their students dropping out or withdrawing, so I’m quite hesitant to say this, but...”

She put on a coquettish smile. “Actually, I have an important announcement to make to everyone here.”

Chikaru blushed playing her part to the fullest extent. “Err... the student paired with Makoto-chan, Lulim’s First Year student, Byakudan Kagome...well, Kagome-chan...doesn’t seem to get along with Makoto-chan, and has insisted on withdrawing from the *Étoile* competition.”

The room was now in utter chaos.

At the time Chikaru was making her announcement, in the St. Miator Faculty Tower, the campus queen, Hanazono Shizuma, stood before a large, heavy oak

door. There was a white envelope in her hand.

She was deciding whether or not to go inside.

If I just say the words...it'll be all over.

Shizuma straightened her posture and grabbed the doorknob.

“St. Miator Girls’ Academy, Sixth Year, Snow Class, Hanazono Shizuma, entering!”

Her voice was gallant, yet lustrous.

“Come in,” a calm, female voice acknowledged Shizuma.

Shizuma’s feet sank into the dark green carpet. She placed the white envelope onto the large desk. The lady who occupied the office remained in her chair as she spoke.

“Are you sure?” the woman asked, her eyes narrowing. The faint scent of her Wild Orchid perfume lingered in the air.

“Yes, Chancellor.”

Shizuma closed her eyes and searched deep into her soul. She used to have some thoughts of wanting to stay back. But she thought it was best for her to do this, and she had convinced herself. Now she was fully determined to see it through.

“I had assumed you’d stay at this school until graduation.” The young, beautiful chancellor smiled as she opened one of the shiny drawers of the mahogany desk. She put Shizuma’s white envelope away. The outside of the envelope bore the words “Request for Withdrawal” inked in black calligraphy. It was Shizuma’s request to drop out of school.

“I really enjoyed attending the St. Miator Girls’ Academy, and hoped to graduate from here, but...” Shizuma wryly grinned. “I suppose I need to end my naïve life at this paradise.”

“Oh, you’re silly. You need not hasten becoming an adult. It’s quite boring, you know.”

The Chancellor tapped her forefinger on Shizuma’s nose. “But I suppose it

can't be helped, especially when it's due to family reasons."

She tried to hug Shizuma's shoulder, but the phone on her desk rang like a little bird.

"Oh, my line is ringing." She grabbed the phone and waved Shizuma away, silently motioning...*that's all, you're dismissed.*

Shizuma took a deep bow and headed out. Just as she touched the door, she overheard the chancellor say, "Yes...Now?!"

Shizuma turned to see what had made the chancellor so surprised. Instead, she saw a strange object outside the window behind the chancellor's desk.

What is that thing?

The Chancellor hung up the phone, and motioned to the object that hovered in the distance. It came closer, and when Shizuma saw the green star on its side, she knew what it was.

It's the Miator helicopter.

Shion was so angry she was sure steam was rising from her head. She had taken blow after blow in her weakened, depressed state.

Miyuki's accusations, Makoto's hidden secret of some sort, and now Chikaru's explosive revelation. Just what in the world is Chikaru up to? Wasn't it she who wanted Kagome to enter the Étoile competition in the first place? And wasn't it her idea to bring Makoto back to Spica? Now her girl wants to drop out and totally kill any chance of Spica's getting the Étoile crown?

Shion had the strange feeling that all of this was part of Chikaru's plan.

"Are you out of your mind?" Kaname pounded the table and stood up.

Shion lost her train of thought.

"What the heck? How come Spica takes the blame for everything! Such audacity! You all have no right to pin this on us!" Kaname fiercely growled.

"No, Kaname-chan...don't talk to President Miyuki like that..." Momomi, sitting beside Kaname, tried to softly warn her.

“Hell no... You want me to sit here and allow everyone to blame Spica? We had already decided on the second round event, but it was you who insisted on changing it to the “Faceless Devil,” President Miyuki!”

Kaname forgot to speak politely. She pointed her finger at Miyuki.

Ah... Excitement ran through the room. Pointing was Astraea’s sign of a challenge. Now that Kaname had started, she could not stop.

“And you, President Chikaru!”

Kaname pointed her finger at Chikaru’s nose as well. “Because of you, we had to bring that shorty, Kusanagi Makoto, into the competition! Because of her, Spica was thrown into dire confusion, and caused Amane-sama to...”

Kaname realized that she just referred to her own upperclassman as “shorty”. She stopped and hung her shoulders in shame.

“Amane-sama and Hikari lost their places in Spica.” Kaname’s voice trembled.

“Kaname.” Momomi looked at the saddened Kaname and sniffed. “We shouldn’t think about those two anymore, because it’s beyond our control. They are probably living happily together. It was fairly obvious how attracted they were to each other.”

Momomi thought back to the first round of the *Étoile* competition, “The Mouth of Truth.” How Amane had carried Hikari in her arms and vowed to love her, and Amane’s intense emotion as she chased after Hikari during the pajama party. She knew how hard Hikari trained to improve her mediocre dancing skills, all with a smile. And how Kaname’s feelings for Hikari eventually softened.

“Every student who attends Spica probably shares the same feelings. We all wish for Amane-sama’s happiness with her first love, even though it’s a little frustrating to see a girl monopolize the prince...so some students may become jealous...but...”

Momomi rubbed Kaname’s back, speaking softly.

“I think everyone knows our devotion to Amane-sama. This may sound rude, but I don’t think Makoto could be considered Amane-sama’s rival. Amane-sama has been Spica’s number one prince, overwhelmingly popular, which is why you

don't hear anyone at Spica lay blame on Amane-sama and Hikari-chan, right? We were much too demanding and pushed them over the edge. But in the end, though they may not say it out loud, I think everyone wishes for their happiness—regardless of whether they stayed at Spica or not.”

Shion choked up watching Kaname and Momomi's inner struggle. Miyuki's words echoed in her heart. They resonated differently now, though.

—“There's no point in continuing the *Étoile* competition.”

—“Find Amane-sama and Konohana-san to have them re-enter the competition...”

—“With the first and second place winners of the first round dropping out the way they did, all of the students who had high hopes for those two couples were utterly disappointed. They turned the competition turn into a big joke.”

One way or another, we're being asked to locate Amane-sama, aren't we?

Shion's thoughts over the past week, which were hazy at first, finally began to take form.

I should go back to square one. First, I strived to win the Étoile crown once Amane-sama, our biggest, unchallenged star, agreed to enter the contest. I wanted nothing but to have her win the crown that she truly deserved. That was my original intent. As the student council president, I wanted our rarely-found Spica star to become the Étoile.

I knew she didn't need any help from me to win it, but Amane-sama was really very shy and didn't enjoy exposing herself to the public. So I wanted to assist her in any way I could, that's all.

Amane-sama, ohh, where in the world have you gone?

Shion looked out of the thick glass window pane staring into the distance. Outside the window lay Maiden Park forest, quiet as usual, under the big blue sky.

Those two girls are somewhere on the other end of this sky. Ohh, but I have no idea where exactly they are.

A small flash in the distance, like the sun reflecting off of something shiny,

shook Shion from her thoughts.

“Huh, what is that?” Tsubomi, looking in the same direction as Shion, cried out.

In the sky there was a small, black dot. It grew bigger as it came closer and soon the machine’s roar shook the room.

Everyone in the room stood up in amazement. The deafening roar got even louder, turning into an unbearable, ear-splitting noise. The black, shiny object grew larger and gradually, the imprinted small, green star became visible. The helicopter rose straight up until...

It’s right above us... Kaname bolted out of the room first.

The other council members were right behind her.

Kaname ran up the emergency staircase, stomping on the bare metal steps. Shion, who had lost her patience with the slow-moving elevator, followed on Kaname’s heels.

When the student council members arrived on the roof, they found several other students had already gathered.

The St. Spica Girls’ Institute Tower Building was the tallest structure on Astraea Hill. On its roof a large, vicious black bird equipped with giant rotary blades had landed—the Miator school helicopter.

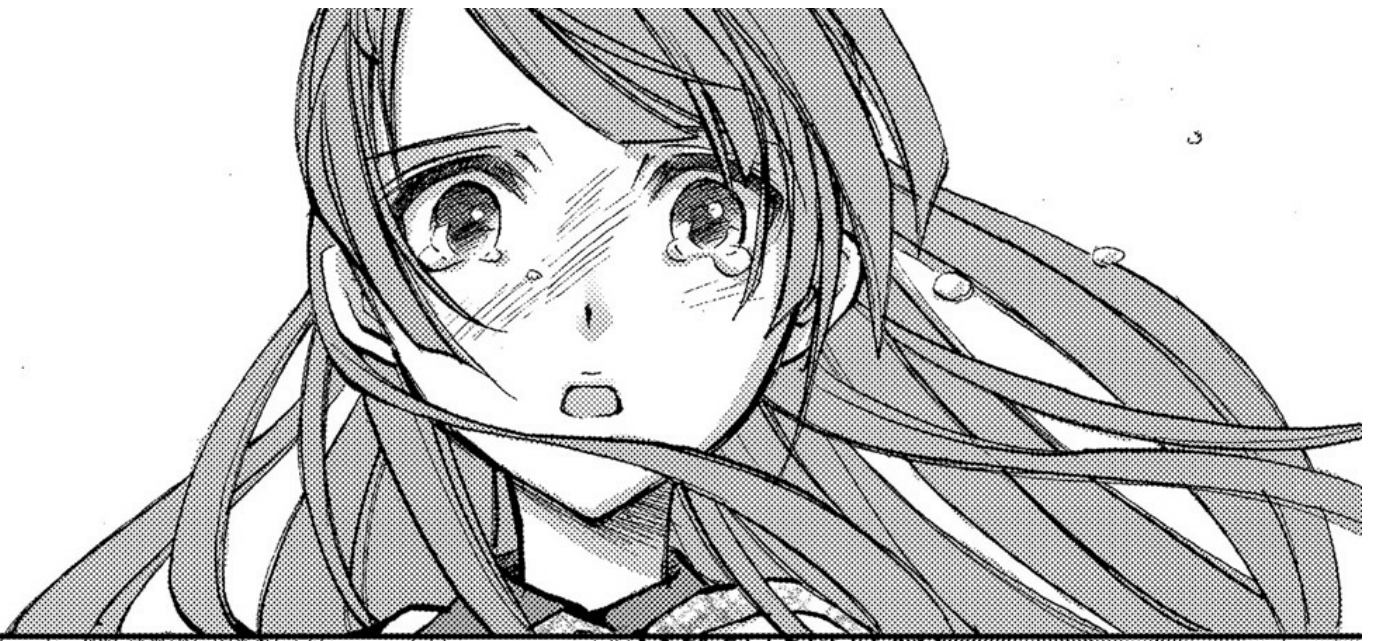
Strong gusts of wind blew across the high roof. Shion struggled to keep her hair out of her face, as she squinted to get a better look.

The twirling rotor blades slowly came to a halt. The center helicopter hatch opened, and two girls sat in the black leather seats. They hopped out of the helicopter, and everyone gasped at once.

It was Spica’s Prince and Princess.

Ahh... Tears flowed out of Shion’s eyes before she could stop them. She covered her mouth to hold back her cries of joy.

Is this a dream? If this is a dream, then it’s a wonderful dream!



The astonished crowd began to whisper among themselves.

One student after another began to cry. Amane shaded her eyes with her hand and scanned the faces until she found who she was looking for. Amane corrected her posture and made a deep bow to Shion. She stood back up, with her shoulders square.

I'm sorry... Amane did not have to say the words for Shion to know how she felt.

Something was different about Amane.

What's different? I don't know exactly, but she just seems different. Spica's ivory Prince looks so clean, so white, and cleansed of impurities. She looks so peaceful.

Amane was illuminated by the early summer sun on the roof, surrounded by a golden halo of light. To Shion, Amane seemed magnificent.

Amane was taken aback by the large crowd that welcomed them. She guarded Hikari while she searched for a place to retreat, but almost immediately, an army of nuns, their faces flushed in surprise, began to pour out from the elevator room on the roof.

Shion thought, *As expected, the chaperons have arrived. I'm not sure why Amane arrived in a Miator helicopter, and at least it brought them safely to Spica. But there is no way Amane and her partner would go unpunished.*

What if they get expelled?

A shiver ran down Shion's spine. It had been a while since she felt such excitement.

She felt a surge of energy from within, and couldn't help but smile.

As the Student Council President of Spica, I cannot allow that to happen. Now that Amane-sama has returned, I can surely bring the school back together.

The students of Spica were filled with sorrow without our Prince Amane. No one wishes for her expulsion. I will submit petitions, conduct boycotts, and do anything and everything to convince the faculty to keep her in school. One way or another, I must prove the innocence of Amane-sama and Konohana-san, and

even if it doesn't work out this year, I will somehow find a way to enter them into the Étoile competition next year.

Shion burned with her motivation. She hadn't felt like this in a long time—not since she became the Student Council President and won the executive power to conduct the *Étoile* competition at the beginning of the year, all for Amane.

I will protect them, no matter what, Shion vowed with a clenched fist. The sisters, who were leading Amane and her partner to the elevator, suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Ding.

The elevator chime rang and the doors opened. Standing inside was an attractive woman in her forties. She wore a pin-striped charcoal gray suit, with a tight knee-length skirt, and a hunter green silk blouse. A power suit. Her soft, wavy black hair flowed down the side of her face, accentuating her prominent eyes and nose. Her smile was noble and gentle, and her stiletto heels, three inches high, clacked as she exited the elevator.

The sisters looked absolutely stunned, and instinctively stepped back to let her through. The woman ignored the sisters and instead walked straight towards Amane. The smell of her perfume—wild orchids—wafted on the air as she passed.

Amane stood her ground, wearing a determined but slightly unsure look. But she was not intimidated by the woman who stood in her way. Hikari hid partially behind Amane, worried.

A different female voice came from behind the woman.

“Goodness, where are we going, Chancellor?”

Shizuma appeared behind the woman. She wore a puzzled look, and was unusually out of breath.

Chancellor? Is she the Chancellor of Miator?

Shion was flabbergasted. *If I understand correctly, the most powerful person in Astraea is the Chancellor of Miator. Astraea is owned and operated by one family, and the Chancellor of Miator is always a female heir of that family.*

Daughters of the family must attend Miator by tradition, but it's never publicly disclosed who they are, in order to keep their identities a secret. I never expected the Chancellor to be so young and beautiful, though. Why is she involved in Spica's problems?

Shion couldn't figure it out just yet.

"Welcome back! The Prince of Spica is really handsome, isn't she?" The Chancellor gleefully said. "It's the first time I've seen her!" She turned her head to get a response from Shizuma, who was behind her.

"Yes, I suppose," replied Shizuma. She pressed her hand to her temple, trying in vain to contain her irritation and discomfort.

The Chancellor, though she'd asked the question, ignored Shizuma's response, and like a sniper taking aim at a target, pointed a finger at Amane's nose.

*Gulp...*the crowd fell silent. Finger-pointing meant a challenge to a duel.

But the Chancellor humphed; she obviously didn't mean or care about the implications of her actions. The elegance she had displayed when she got off the elevator all but disappeared, to be replaced with a mature, lustful smile.

"I want her." The Chancellor, almost licking her lips, looked at Amane as if she were some kind of prey. She drew closer to Amane. Standing close to Amane, she caressed Amane's cheek with her hand. Her hand moved slowly and deliberately.

Hikari, who was hiding behind Amane, trembled. *Amane-sama doesn't like this at all.*

Shion, observing the situation, desperately hoped that Amane wouldn't lose her temper and swat the Chancellor's hand away. *The Amane I know wouldn't tolerate this. She would have gotten angry or red-faced and pushed that hand away already.*

But Amane didn't budge, only gazed at the Chancellor, seeming neither angry nor embarrassed. She simply stood there, hiding nothing, showing her true self.

She planted her feet firmly on the ground, confident. From her straightforward stance, she asked a straightforward question.

“And who in the world are you?”

The Chancellor and Amane looked each other in the eye. Amane, finally returned to Spica, stood tall in the face of her biggest challenge yet. She projected a majestic aura, her presence sparkling in the eyes of the observers that surrounded her.

Amane-sama has changed... Shion swallowed.

The Chancellor stared at the unmoving Amane and let out a breath.

“Excuse me.”

She lowered her hand from Amane’s cheek. Though she retained a sense of elegance and glamour, her expression turned soft and caring, into the face of a gentle educator.

You are quite lovely. A pure white star shimmering in gold.

“Your predicament is rather...unfortunate. I’m aware of your situation, Ms. Otori Amane, Spica, Fifth Year, Trois Class. You lost your patience, dropped out of the *Étoile* competition, and out of desperation fled from school, right? I never expected a student who ran away from school to have this much courage. A person like you, with the strength of a king, is best fit for our St. Miator Girls’ Academy, don’t you think?”

The Chancellor turned and winked at Shizuma. Shizuma didn’t think Miator was the best school for Amane, but knew it was impolite to contradict the Chancellor.

“I suppose...”

The Chancellor went on. “You know after causing all this trouble, she’ll eventually get expelled from Spica, right? Once that happens, there shouldn’t be any problems transferring her to Miator. Spica’s reputation will be maintained, Prince Amane’s records will be wiped clean, and Miator will gain yet another outstanding student. A brilliant plan, right? Oh, I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I am the Chancellor of St. Miator Girls’ Academy.”

As the Chancellor introduced herself, she fished for a business card in the breast pocket of her suit.

“Stop it!!”

Shion’s voice pierced the air.

“Please stop!! Amane-sama is Spica’s one and only bright star. We cannot stand idly by and watch our most revered star be swept away to Miator.”

Shion’s pleas hung over the crowd. The helicopter’s sudden appearance had attracted the attention of many Spica students, and in fact a significant portion of them had gathered on the rooftop. The several dozen students, naturally grouped by class, formed a large ring around the helicopter.

Shion shook in anger as she approached the center of the ring and cut in between Amane and the Chancellor.

The Chancellor lifted an eyebrow, surprised at this sudden outburst. “Oh, you say that, but didn’t the students of Spica persecute Prince Amane for breaking the rules? I heard about the arrival of Kusanagi Makoto—the younger sister of the legendary *Étoile*—who split the Spica supporters in half. It seems a waste to keep a magnificent student like her in a school full of disloyal students.”

Shion spread her arms out, protecting Amane. “Despite the differing opinions, the fact of the matter is that Amane-sama is the person who best represents Spica! The small fraction of Spica students who prematurely ceased their support for Amane-sama lost their focus a bit. A temporary delusion, that’s all. Every Spica student knows the truth deep down. Amane-sama is our only hope.

“No matter how dark the skies are, and no matter how much rain pours down, the strongest star of Spica is Amane-sama. When she disappeared from school, none of the students made a fuss about her whereabouts. On the surface, it may have seemed like nobody cared, or that nobody loved her, but we were only keeping silent in order to prevent further troubles. We didn’t want anything to block Amane-sama’s return, because the students of Spica believed that Amane-sama would come back to us someday.

“That is why none of the students took action. They just couldn’t. We will not allow Amane-sama to be taken from us ever! I will never allow that to happen!”

Shion bellowed her last words as tears welled in her eyes.

Amane was struck by Shion's words. She closed her eyes.

Shion's words... The students of Spica need me... I can't just leave the Spica students behind...

Amane's shoulders relaxed. She even smiled.

So, that's it...

She looked at Hikari, anxiously standing by her side.

It actually feels good to be needed by someone.

Amane gently patted Hikari's head and stepped in front of Shion.

"Chancellor, I appreciate your generosity of transporting us back here. But I don't have the strength of a king. I just hope that I have enough strength to protect the ones I love. The little bit of strength I have now didn't come from me, though."

Amane took a deep breath and looked up to the sky.

"I received this strength from the skies of Spica."

She looked at Hikari and everyone around her. She looked into each student's face. Every one of them watched Amane, supporting her with their hearts.

Amane smiled triumphantly, her white teeth gleaming.

"And from all the Spica students who love and support me."

Oh, Amane-sama, the students whispered between tears of joy.

"I am humbled by your offer, but I will not transfer to Miator. I love Spica. When I realized I might not be able to return to Spica, it made me realize how much I loved this school. Hikari probably feels the same way, too."

Amane firmly gripped Hikari's hand.

"I want to make Hikari happy at Spica. No, I want to be happy with Hikari. I now know that we couldn't be truly happy if we kept on running. And it made me discover that I wanted to enrich the happiness of everyone who supports me. I am happy when Hikari is happy. I want Hikari to be the happiest person

alive. I shouldn't be fearful of all this happiness. I wish for all the students of Spica to be happy as they can be."

Amane raised Hikari's hand high in the air for everyone to see, then she lowered Hikari's hand and kissed it. Then she kneeled on the ground, as if she was praying or repenting.

"As punishment for my ignorance, I will accept expulsion from Spica."

Amane closed her eyes. The crowd fell silent. The girls around her could not speak.

Clap, clap, clap clap...

Someone clapped their hands, slowly and deliberately. The sound traveled through the crowd until everyone applauded Amane.

"Well, it looks like your total defeat, Chancellor. Or should I address you as 'Mother'?"

The speaker broke through the center of the crowd, and approached Shion from behind.

"Currently at Miator, you have the Four Saints, with Shizuma-sama, Miyuki-sama, and Marikoya-sama leading the pack. There is a potential star candidate in the Fourth Year, Suzumi-san, plus a new type of heroine, Aoi-san, as well. How many more stars do you want, Mother?"

The person repeatedly addressed the Chancellor as "Mother."

The Chancellor seemed distraught. "Chikaru..." But the next moment she straightened her posture and smirked.

"Oh, but it was you who requested their readmission, wasn't it? That's why I went to all the trouble of bringing them back."

"No, what I asked was to readmit them to Spica. How could you overlook such an obvious detail? But then again, I suppose you always end up manipulating things to your advantage." Chikaru shrugged.

"Of course I do. You know me too well, my daughter."

The growing crowd was taken aback by the insidious conversation.

Is Chikaru-sama...perhaps...?

The Chancellor walked towards Chikaru.

“You know the reason I continue to search for new stars is because you left me. Remember? Fine, since you finally came and addressed me as your mother in public, why don’t you just leave Lulim and come back to me and Miator? Yes, that’s a great idea.” The Chancellor’s eyes twinkled mischevously. “Chikaru-chan, if you transfer to Miator, I promise to have these two safely readmitted to Spica.”

Amane held up her hand to stop the conversation. “Hold it! I’m not asking for a deal! The reason I called President Chikaru is because I just wanted to come back to Astraea Hill. I never expected to be readmitted.”

Chikaru let out a loud sigh, as if to blow off the Chancellor’s offer.

“This is exactly why I chose to enter Lulim, Mother!” she snapped, glaring at the Chancellor.

“You know that the only time I call you ‘Mother’ is...?”

“When you’re mad at me, right?” the Chancellor snickered.

“Correct. Ever since I was a child, you have openly followed your own desires, and failed to consider the feelings of others. So I made sure my actions and feelings were understood clearly by you.”

By this time Remon and Kizuna had joined the growing crowd. The two girls were shocked at Chikaru’s conversation.

We never imagined Chikaru-oneesama to have such a thorny upbringing.

The appearance of the Miator Chancellor, Minamoto Chihiro, had taken everyone by surprise. The news had spread like wildfire that the Miator helicopter had brought back the Prince. The crowd was twice the size it had been when the Chancellor had arrived.

“You’re so blunt, Chikaru-chan. You should be more lenient with your own daughter,” the Chancellor joked.

“Gee, I’m the daughter, not you. I never wanted to attend Miator anyway. I didn’t want to glide down the Miator path automatically. The same path that

my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother followed. Especially since my mother is the Chancellor and has such a self-centered attitude”

Chikaru skirted away from her mother until she stood behind Amane. She lightly pushed Amane’s shoulders.

“Like your selfish plan for her transfer,” Chikaru said. “It’s quite obvious that my school life would have been negatively affected by your antics. That’s why I wanted to create my own path. I chose Lulim. Yes, I know you think it’s the bridal preparation school for commoners, the newest and most relaxed school of Astraea. But the freedom, warmth, and beauty of Lulim best fits me.”

What a foolish child. The Chancellor threw her hands into the air, disappointed. “Indeed. You made such a rash decision because you’re too inexperienced. Watch, you’ll regret not choosing Miator when you become an adult and want to advance your career.”

Chikaru’s tone was serious. “I will not regret it at all. I love Lulim. Lulim gave me freedom, youth, love.” She scanned the crowd, and eventually found Kizuna and Remon, far in the back. The little girls were jumping up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of Chikaru above the tall crowd.

When Chikaru saw the girls she was overjoyed.

Their faces are so red. They’re worrying about me, I’m sure. Oh, my cute little angels. Those girls are my true family.

Chikaru, moved, closed her eyes.

“I found my true family at Lulim. I believe Otori-san feels the same way about her school.”

She patted Amane’s shoulders, lending her support to Amane and Hikari.

“I completely understand her desire to start over at Spica, the school where she found her love. Due to her God-given talents, she had to bear mounting pressure. Over the years I am certain that there were moments when she wanted to escape from it all, but she returned to become Spica’s star again of her own volition. It would be pointless for her to be admitted to a school other than Spica.”

Chikaru focused back on Chancellor Chihiro.

“As an educator, can you please give consideration to her plight?”

There was a brief pause. Everyone gathered held their breath as they waited for the Chancellor’s decision.

Amane broke the silence, speaking clearly in a low, sultry voice.

“I would like another chance to become Spica’s star.”

She put on a big, bashful grin for the crowd. “If everyone can forgive me, that is.”

Half a heartbeat went by before the cheers broke out, like a wave of sound. The girls in white uniforms, which made up the majority of the crowd, were elated. Some clapped, and some cried, but all cheered.

“Amane-sama...”

“Our White Prince...”

“We will gladly welcome you back...”

Amane tried to hold back her tears as she scanned the group.

I will never forget this day for the rest of my life...

Chikaru patted Amane’s shoulder again, as tears welled up in Hikari’s eyes.

“Amane-sama, I’m so glad,” said Hikari.

Hikari’s frail voice was so irresistible that Amane hugged her. The cheers grew louder.

“Amane-sama...”

“We support you, and wish you happiness...”

“We’re envious of Hikari-chan...”

“Thank you, everyone. I vow to all who support me that I will make Hikari happy, and for all the students of Spica, I will win the *Étoile* crown!”

She spread her arms out as the crowd roared.

Amane hugged Hikari's shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

"I promise to make you happy," Amane whispered into Hikari's ear, making her blush.

Thunderous applause, and tears of joy.

Cutting through the storm of applause, another student came running onto the roof.

"So, Amane, you've come back!"

Kusanagi Makoto emerged from the elevator and waded through the tightly packed throng. She had been on her way to Lulim to check on Kagome, but changed her course when she saw the Miator helicopter land on the roof.

The air grew tense. Up until this moment, Amane and Hikari had won over the crowd. But their biggest opponent had just arrived. Kusanagi Makoto, the little Emperor, who had protested Amane's competing in the *Étoile*, and had acted openly hostile towards Amane, berating her.

The group wondered what Makoto was going to say to Amane...

Will she say...how irresponsible...selfish...unfair...and pathetic to come back?

The tension was almost unbearable, and the crowd froze. The only person moving was pale-faced Makoto, silent as she brazenly pushed her way through the crowd, heading straight for Amane.

By the time she stood in front of Amane, she was out of breath.

"Why are you the only ones returning?"

No one else could hear her whisper.

The next moment, Makoto straightened her back and fixed her eyes on Amane. She raised a fist.

She's going to punch me..., thought Amane as she clenched her teeth.

But Makoto's cold, nervous fingers only touched Amane's cheek. Gently, she stroked Amane's face. Her expression relaxed, and a thin stream of tears glided down her cheeks.

Makoto saw Amane through her tears, a blurry image that resembled the

person she loved most.

She's back. The person I love most. She didn't abandon me.

"Oh, I'm so glad that you're back, Oneesan."

Makoto, unaware of her mistake, gently hugged Amene.

"Mako-chan," Chikaru said, surprised. "That's not your oneesan. I'm sorry."

Makoto looked up at Amene, her eyes clear, and then dropped to her knees.

Kagome, who had followed Makoto to the roof and stood next to Chikaru with her teddy bear, went to Makoto and patted her head.

Chapter 5

The Maidens Drew Water from the Fountain of Courage

Ding dong...

Astraea Hill's second dismissal bell rang.

The shocking scene on the rooftop had been prolonged by the Chancellor's sudden appearance and Makoto's teary one. But at the sound of the bell, the Spica nuns came to their senses.

"Please excuse us," the sisters said politely to the Chancellor as they escorted Amane and Hikari off the roof.

The two girls, tired from their adventure, were actually relieved to leave the scene and followed the sisters willingly. The elevator was already at the roof, thanks to the most recent visitor, so the group entered it and descended, headed for the Spica Chancellor's office on the first floor of the tower.

The crowd gradually dissipated. Students who weren't participating in clubs and after-school activities were not allowed to stay on campus past the second bell. That night at the Strawberry Dorms there was a boatload of students on additional duties as punishment for violating that rule.

Tomori Shion was worried about Amane and Hikari, so she followed the sisters, and asked the remaining student council members of each school to quickly usher the rest of the students out of school.

The students continued to share their excitement with fellow classmates, hesitant to leave, but the student council members slowly but surely managed to get them back to the Strawberry Dorms.

The only people left on the roof were Chikaru, Miyuki, Shizuma, and the Chancellor.

Chikaru remarked, “I didn’t expect Makoto-chan to cry like that.”

After Makoto’s breakdown, Kizuna and Remon had comforted her. Makoto had sobbed as she left, Kagome pulling her by the hand.

Miyuki, her gaze distant, commented, “Though she fiercely competed against Amane-sama, deep inside, she had projected the image of her older sister onto Amane-sama.”

She felt terrible for trying to manipulate Makoto and orchestrate a large scandal. She glanced at Shizuma, who stood there in silence, smiling peacefully.

The Chancellor threw a quizzical look at Shizuma, then faced Chikaru.

“So, Chikaru...” The Chancellor smiled, but Chikaru only looked disgusted.

“Will you consider my proposition?”

“Proposition?” asked Chikaru.

“Aww, did you forget already? About your transfer. I’ll convince the Spica Chancellor to readmit Prince Amane and her partner, so won’t you come to Miator?”

“Oh, did you expect me to fall for that? After I had a big argument with you and left the house?” Chikaru’s smile was spiteful.

Like mother, like daughter, Miyuki thought. *Chikaru is absolutely unbelievable.*

Miyuki was unnerved. She smiled wryly at the Chancellor.

“Chikaru-sama is highly regarded as Lulim’s Holy Mother and is therefore an indispensable person at Lulim. Even if she transfers, she will have less than two years before she graduates. I recommend Chikaru-sama stay where she is.”

Chikaru was encouraged by Miyuki’s words.

“That’s right, my long-awaited dream of establishing Class Z is about to happen. I’m never giving up my dream of creating my own harem!” Chikaru declared, playfully punching her fist into the sky.

During the conversation, Shizuma stood at a distance, observing. Chikaru looked back at Shizuma, who instinctively averted her eyes to avoid her gaze.

Acting as if she was looking at her watch, she said quietly, “Chikaru-sama should come to Miator, Miyuki, because I will be leaving soon.”

Miyuki’s and Chikaru’s jaws dropped.

Yaya stood in front of the chancellor’s office, waiting for the two girls. She wasn’t motivated to sing today, so she skipped choir practice and read a book on the grassy knolls of Maiden Garden. She never went up to the roof.

She heard the excited voices of students on their way home, walking past her as she lay on the grass.

The girls squealed and gossiped, and Yaya overheard bits of what had happened.

They came back? Yaya’s heart leapt and she became restless. She ran straight to the Chancellor’s office, where the girls had supposedly been escorted.

Yaya eagerly stood by in front of the Chancellor’s office, waiting for them to come out. She stared at one spot on the wall, not moving an inch, and waited patiently.

One question whirled through Yaya’s mind: *Is this a dream? Maybe I’ll wake up in my room, and see Hikari’s empty bed again. That would be too sad.*

Yaya shut her eyes at the fearful thought. There was a faint noise as the door opened.

Creak...

Yaya opened her eyes, and there stood her golden angel.

Wow...Yaya thought of all the things she had wanted to say when she reunited with Hikari. *Are you tired from the long trip? You were stupid for leaving? Maybe if I winked at her and said never to leave me, she’ll be relieved.*

But instead, Yaya just hugged Hikari without saying a word. First softly, then tighter. She did it right in front of Amane without a care in the world. The best way for Yaya and Hikari to communicate their feelings was to embrace. They were both crying.

“I’m sorry for making you worry, Yaya-chan.”

“It’s all right. As long as you’re happy, Hikari-chan.”

Yaya was simply happy to see Hikari again, to touch her. It was a lot simpler and better than her dreams about Hikari. Hugging fulfilled and empowered her.

Based on the Miator Chancellor’s endorsement, Spica granted Amane’s and Hikari’s request for readmittance. Regarding the prohibited entry into the chapel, the school staff concluded that “both students were chasing after an unknown intruder at midnight,” and dropped the charges.

One week later, at St. Miator Girls’ Academy, stories of Amane and Hikari’s dramatic return had spread throughout the Miator campus from first-hand witnesses. The two girls’ bold escape from the Strawberry Dorms—the biggest elopement ever—the ostentatious return on a helicopter chartered by Chikaru, plus Amane’s public proposal of love to Hikari, and finally, the vow to capture the *Étoile* crown had captured the hearts of the rivaling Miator students. It quickly became a fad for Miator couples to make promises to “elope,” and the campus was permeated by the legendary story of Amane and Hikari.

Meanwhile, Nagisa and Tamao were eating lunch in the inner garden. Tamao pulled out an egg salad sandwich, Nagisa’s favorite, and shared it with her. Nagisa politely took the sandwich, but was lost in her thoughts. She was recalling the stories of Amane and Hikari that gossip-loving Iohata Momiji shared.

Momiji had pounded on the desk repeatedly, she was so moved by the two girls’ deep love for each other. Nagisa listened to the story and agreed with Momiji—those two were made for each other. Prince Amane came back to Spica and begged for forgiveness, all for Hikari, and was somehow forgiven.

According to Momiji, the sheer beauty of the two lovers moved the crowd, and prompted everyone to support them.

Nagisa tried to recreate the scene in her mind.

I can actually imagine that.

She recalled the Maiden horse race in the first round of the *Étoile* competition.

I remember Hikari-chan, desperately trying to pull me up, because I fell off the tower in place of her. Amane-sama made a heroic effort to rescue us.

As she munched on the egg salad sandwich, Nagisa thought, *Those two are probably empowered by each other. In the end, Shizuma-sama saved me, but unfortunately I'm not with her anymore. I let go of that strong, beautiful hand...*

Her hand stopped. There was a lump in her throat as her heart squeezed tight.

"Hey, Nagisa-chan... you're dropping crumbs everywhere," Tamao said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was daydreaming," Nagisa replied.

"I see. Listen, Nagisa-chan. It was really brief, but Shizuma-sama came on to me once."

"Eh?"

The topic changed so suddenly that Nagisa barely heard what Tamao had said.

"It happened when Shizuma-sama was in junior high. I was a new First Year student, so I was really surprised. Shizuma-sama was a big deal at this school and she was as wonderful then as she is now. But I was afraid and ran from her."

Nagisa was utterly confused.

Tamao-chan had prior relations with Shizuma-sama? Neither of them shared that with me until now. So, in the classroom, is that why she kissed Tamao-chan?

Nagisa's mind was filled with questions. Tamao ignored Nagisa's bewilderment and continued.

"So that kiss was just Shizuma-oneesama's petty joke," Tamao commented, as if she had read Nagisa's mind. "If you get in a serious relationship with Shizuma-sama, it'll definitely wear you out."

Nagisa didn't know how to respond. There was a long silence, with Tamao avoiding Nagisa's gaze. Finally she asked the dreaded question.

"Are you in love with Shizuma-sama?"

Nagisa began to cry. "I don't know."

That day, as if it had waited for Amane and Hikari to return, the announcement of the third and final round of the *Étoile* competition was posted. At the end of lunch hour under the clear, blue skies, the student council members of each school posted the announcement on their bulletin boards.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Notice of this year's *Étoile* Competition Third Round

The final round of the *Étoile* Competition, entitled "*Le Dernier Miracle*," will be conducted on the date specified below.

All students must purify their bodies and souls to prepare for and await the birth of the new *Étoile*.

There will be no further changes to the third round event from this day forward.

THIRD ROUND

Le Dernier Miracle (The Last Miracle)

Seventh Month on the Day of Saint Thomas

Event: Fencing Duel

Amane and Hikari's names were included in the list of participating couples. Also posted on the board, near the edge, was another announcement so small that most Spica students failed to notice it.

NOTICE

The student noted below will leave Astraea Hill at the end of July.

St. Miator Girls' Academy

Sixth Year, Snow Class

Hanazono Shizuma

Action:

Dismissal from school

Reason:

Foreign study in Europe

At Miator, news of Shizuma's impending travel abroad spread through the campus like wildfire. The sudden news caused students to be surprised, angered by the irrational decision, and deeply saddened by the seriousness of the situation.

All regarded Shizuma as Miator's undisputed queen, so this earth-shattering news threw the Miator students into a state of confusion. During every break for the next few days, the students would gather and chatter about what would happen once they lost Shizuma.

"Shizuma-sama is probably going to Europe because Aoi-san dumped her, right?"

"No, you've got it backwards... Shizuma-sama is studying abroad, so she decided to withdraw from the Étoile competition!"

"I heard that Shizuma-sama got over Aoi-san and moved on to Suzumi-san."

Someone saw them kissing in the classroom after school!”

“Really? Maybe Suzumi-san will join her and they’ll study abroad together? Oh my gosh! If that happens, then once the Fifth Year class graduates, Miator will lose viable candidates for the Étoile competition.”

“Have you heard the rumor about Minamoto Chikaru-sama transferring from Lulim to Miator to replace Shizuma-sama?”

“Dummy, that was a joke made by the Chancellor during Prince Amane’s return.”

Rumors begat more rumors, leaving Miator in a storm of chaos. But Shizuma never opened her mouth on the subject, and in fact, refused to talk with anyone. She was aware that Hitomi and Mizuho were quietly watching her in the classroom, worried looks on their faces, but she even refused to explain things to her closest friends.

Hitomi and Mizuho were obviously worried. They knew exactly why Shizuma withdrew from the Étoile competition—because Hitomi had dredged up the past and told Nagisa about Kaori.

But watching Shizuma, Hitomi and Mizuho had the same thoughts.

Is she serious about leaving? If she really wanted Nagisa, nothing would have stopped her. What happened to Shizuma-sama?

Hitomi wondered if it was Nagisa herself that had something to do with Shizuma’s change in personality. Shizuma’s tranquil silence only increased Hitomi and Mizuho’s concerns.

Maybe Shizuma is trying to change.

The pair could not figure out Shizuma’s intentions. As longtime friends of Shizuma, this was the first time they felt this way. For some reason, they wanted Shizuma to talk to Nagisa.

If Shizuma-sama talked to the girl one more time, maybe she would go back to being her normal self—bright, strong, and true to herself like before. Or did Shizuma-sama change because she broke up with Nagisa?

Hitomi shuddered at the thought of what she might have caused.

I wasn't able to sort out my feelings, and I took it out on Shizuma. I was in love with Kaori, but Kaori was in love with Shizuma. And Shizuma eventually let Kaori go and pursued Nagisa and loved her. I felt sorry for Kaori, like Shizuma was dishonoring her memory, but I turned a blind eye to Shizuma's new feelings. In my mind, I kept attacking Shizuma for pursuing Nagisa. And when Shizuma tried to chase after Nagisa I interfered.

Of course, I knew that didn't cause her to give up Nagisa. It was something else. Something inside Shizuma caused her to change. Darnit, I'm so ashamed of myself. I'm supposed to be Shizuma-sama's best friend. But I wonder if Shizuma saw that love was more important than friendship?

Soon, Hitomi began to accept Shizuma's decision to study abroad. *Am I just looking for an excuse to avoid responsibility? No, that's not it.*

Shizuma's foreign study was actually something the female members of the famous Hanazono clan were scheduled to do. The Miator students should have already been aware of that fact. Shizuma was the only daughter of the Hanazono syndicate. The Hanazono clan had grown into a large conglomerate, owning several businesses. It was so large it was often regarded as a kingdom.

Shizuma was the sole heiress to this kingdom. She was a young, beautiful daughter who had been a queen from birth.

This young queen had other news, which she had been keeping secret, but which was soon being covered on TV and in magazines across the globe for days. Even the isolated maidens of Astraea became aware of it, but nobody had the courage to bring up the subject.

The other news was a potential engagement.

Engagement was a common happening in Miator, and especially with Shizuma, who received many proposals of marriage throughout the year. No one expected the proud Shizuma to give in to her parents' wishes and accept a marriage proposal, though. After a few times, nobody paid attention to her potential engagements.

Even Hitomi and Mizuho couldn't hide their surprise at the recent news article. And with Shizuma remaining silent, they couldn't possibly confirm it.

The subject was too touchy and scary.

The headline of the paper read: “Hanazono Syndicate’s only daughter is the best candidate for our next Empress.”

Shizuma had received a marriage proposal from royalty.

“I apologize for calling you out here.”

Makoto, looking refreshed, turned around and looked at Chikaru.

She’s starting to look like her sister, thought Chikaru. Tsk... Mako-chan would probably make a fuss if I said that.

“Oh, no problem.” Chikaru’s voice echoed in the empty chapel.

It was third period. The only ones skipping class were Makoto, who had lost the motivation to study, and Chikaru, who, as student council president, had the special privilege of being able to leave class at any time.

It was the beginning of July. The inside of the chapel was usually cool from the high ceilings, but it seemed a bit hot and muggy now. Makoto stared at the large, stained glass window above the altar. It depicted the Savior going to Heaven, the moment a human child became a child of God.

She looked over to the pictures on the walls. The standard pictures of the Savior’s struggles circled the walls of the chapel. Makoto stared at each picture in succession.

At the end, after all the struggles, was a miraculous resurrection.

“I thought...my Neesan was unhappy because of me.” Makoto shyly smiled.

“I kept telling you it wasn’t your fault,” responded Chikaru.

“Yeah, you were right, Chika. But I didn’t want to believe it.”

Makoto was straightforward and mature. She had a sharp, boyish face, like it was polished.

“But I was so jealous. I can’t believe my Neesan chose that person over us!”

She no longer harbored any extra emotional baggage, and spoke from the

heart. "I kept telling myself it was my fault, just so I would have a reason. So I would feel better about forcing myself into her life."

Makoto didn't face Chikaru. Instead, her words were directed at the sky. She closed her eyes, trusting the heavens, and imagined the blue summer sky of Russia.

"That's how it feels to be in love." Chikaru laughed.

Makoto opened her eyes. She wore a soft, beautiful expression that Chikaru had never seen on Makoto's face.

Makoto laughed.

"Have you ever been in love, Chika?"

Chikaru thought about it. "Hmm...who knows? But when I look at Amane-sama and Hikari-chan..."

Makoto finished her sentence, "Yeah, looking at the two of them... I knew that those two were really happy to be with each other. They were destined to be together, you know? Just like my sister and her love."

Chikaru smiled silently. Makoto closed her eyes again, remembering her sister's face, Amane's face, and Chikaru's face.

"I think I'm already in love with someone. And I'm glad that those two returned to school."

Makoto bid farewell to the stained glass picture of the resurrection, and turned to face Chikaru. She seemed somehow cleansed.

"Neesan never came back, but they did. I hope they become a wonderful *Étoile*. Chika... I'm sorry, but I want to withdraw from the *Étoile* competition."

Chikaru, pleased to hear that, smiled. Makoto was relieved to see her smile, but at the same time, she felt a little lonely.

Chika is aware of my feelings for her. Despite that, she's smiling.

She remembered the picture she had found and snuck into her suitcase, hidden behind the altar.

I'm glad to have come back, even for a short period of time. Glad to obtain a

picture of the legendary Étoile, Kusanagi Masaki, being crowned, and that I was able to take a picture with my gentle Chika. That's good enough for me...

"I'm going back to Russia, since I no longer have a reason to stay."

She jumped onto the altar, with her back to Chikaru, like she was praying. Warm sunlight filtered through the stained glass and showered Makoto with color as she loudly declared, "I love you just as much as my Oneesan, Chika!"

Yes, thank you... Chikaru replied in her heart. She placed something in Makoto's hand.

"What's this?" Makoto asked, regaining her innocent smile.

She'll be fine.

Chikaru's heart bloomed in her chest. "Mako-chan, I couldn't give this to you while you had a chip on your shoulder. Because you despised your brother-in-law, and men in general, in order to hold yourself together, I feared that you might be ruined by this. But I think you can handle it now. After seeing Amanechan and her love, you finally understand, don't you? It doesn't matter if your love is a male or female, it only matters that you are happy."

When Makoto opened her hand, there was a paper, folded in half. It was a one-way plane ticket to Vienna.

"Please send my regards to Masaki-sama," smiled Chikaru.

My happiness is to be with you, Makoto thought, but did not say it out loud. She waved behind her as she departed with a smile.

Nagisa was at the lowest point of her life ever. Even a casual observer could tell, it was so obvious. The Miator campus without Shizuma looked bare to Nagisa's eyes.

Ever since the day Shizuma came to say goodbye to Nagisa, she knew she'd never see Shizuma again.

In her heart, she longed for Shizuma. Each time Nagisa heard rumors about Shizuma at school, she was reminded of how much she didn't know about Shizuma. Like, that studying abroad was a normal part of the Hanazono clan's

curriculum.

Shizuma had insisted on staying until Sixth Year, but her family had insisted she complete her obligation abroad. Nagisa knew Shizuma came from a wealthy family, but didn't know how famous they were. A marriage proposal from royalty! To Nagisa, that was mind-shattering news. Shizuma had probably chosen to study abroad in order to decline the engagement offer, another concept beyond Nagisa's comprehension.

To anyone else it would be the ultimate Cinderella dream, but to Shizuma it was a cue to run. Of course, Shizuma wasn't a rags-to-riches princess, but still, it was far beyond Nagisa's wildest imagination.

Shizuma-sama decided to go away...oh...gosh...and she even turned down the offer...

Even Nagisa knew that refusing an engagement proposal from royalty came with a price. Shizuma had chosen to hide in Europe for a while, to lessen the dire consequences. According to the rumors, for the Hanazono clan marrying into royalty was not only unattractive, but an unnecessary burden.

Oh gosh, what kind of world does Shizuma-sama live in?

Every story Nagisa heard was unbelievably shocking and scary. It dawned on her that she was just an ignorant newbie. *No wonder other people hate me, and laugh at me. I definitely didn't know a lot of things.*

She surely didn't know much about Shizuma's precarious situation, either.

Shizuma had stopped attending classes so that she could prepare for her study abroad. Nagisa couldn't share her thoughts with Tamao, who seemed to be treating her coldly for some reason. Ever since Tamao asked her if she was in love with Shizuma, Tamao had seemed to be lost in her thoughts.

My heart aches so much without Shizuma-oneesama.

Nagisa couldn't dare share that with Tamao. She didn't know what to do, but she would go crazy if she stayed put. So she decided to wander around the Miator school buildings. She felt hollow and lonely. Her legs instinctively walked towards the Sixth Year classrooms in Tower Five. She stood in front, but couldn't bring herself to enter the building full of upperclassmen, especially

since she knew Shizuma wasn't there anymore. Nagisa did an awkward about-face in front of the Tower Five entrance and wandered away.

Somehow she ended up in Maiden Garden. She looked up to the hot, blue sky, sweat rolling down her neck. The white summer roses that used to bloom all throughout Maiden Garden were no longer there, and in their place, lush greenery filled the area. The smell of fresh grass was overwhelming.

Wow. Nagisa shielded her eyes with her hand as she looked up. It was summer already.

Where should I go? she wondered.

In front of her was a small path that led to the library. Trotting down the path towards her was Chiyo.

Ah, Chiyo-chan.

Nagisa stared at her blankly, forgetting to greet Chiyo-chan.

"Nagisa-oneesama! Good day! Are you going to the library?" Chiyo smiled.

She was probably on her way back from library duty. Nagisa forgot to respond, and looked at Chiyo-chan like she was far away.

Chiyo-chan's smile is cute as a little meadowsweet flower, Nagisa thought.

And she remembered that day. The first day she arrived at Miator—a pleasant, sunny day, like today. It was spring, and the white meadowsweets were in full bloom. Nagisa recalled that she had been looking forward to the start of her new adventure that day.

That was the day she first met Shizuma. It seemed like it had happened so long ago.

"Nagisa-oneesama."

Teary-eyed, Chiyo called out to Nagisa, staring off into the distance.

"I'm sorry, what are you saying, Chiyo-sama?"

"Umm... maybe you should...go see Shizuma-sama one more time?"

Nagisa's heart swelled at the suggestion.

Yes, I want to see her.

Nagisa woke up the next morning, her mind made up. It was the morning of the third round of *Étoile* competition. Upon Amane's return to school, the rainy season cleared up and left dry, sunny weather.

When Nagisa sat up in her bed, Tamao was already in the shower room, getting ready for school. The *Étoile* competition Sequence of Events guide lay on the table next to Tamao's bed.

There were no other events in Astraea that day. To celebrate the birth of a new holy *Étoile*...all classes, clubs, and after-school activities were cancelled, while the students anticipated, then cheered for, and crowned the new *Étoile*.

The third round was a fencing duel—a one-on-one fencing competition. On the cover of the Sequence of Events guide were illustrations of the *Aînée* contestants, dressed up as medieval knights, and the *Cadettes*, wearing medieval princess outfits, as costume-loving Astraea traditions called for.

This year's *Étoile* Executive Committee was run by the Spica Student Council, so among illustrations was a short-haired knight wearing a feathered hat, and a delicate princess with curly, golden locks wearing a high-waist dress—similar to Juliet's dress in *Romeo and Juliet*—which somewhat resembled Amane and Hikari.

Nagisa stared at the cover for a while.

We were supposed to be in this competition, too. Shizuma-oneesama was supposed to fight for me like this.

A small tear drop fell.

I'm so stupid. I love her so much, but I ran away. There's nothing I can do about it now. Shizuma-sama probably decided to go abroad because she grew tired of a whiny girl like me. I should have never let her go. I'll never meet someone like her, ever again.

Her heart burned with regret.

Will I never see her again? Once Shizuma-sama goes to England, will I ever get

a chance to see her face again?

Memories of being with Shizuma flashed through her mind. Shizuma, suddenly bursting into Nagisa's classroom without warning. Shizuma, who normally had no reason to visit underclassmen towers, regularly visiting her. Shizuma, inviting Nagisa to take a bath with her at the Strawberry Dorms.

And Shizuma, always hugging her. Shizuma, forcibly kissing her.

Shizuma, whispering that she loved Nagisa.

My Shizuma-oneesama...

She couldn't hold it back anymore. Her feelings for Shizuma were so great, hot tears flowed down her cheeks.

I need to see her. I don't care if she's mean to me, or picks on me. I don't care if she says goodbye to me again. I need to see Shizuma-oneesama one more time. I can't let her leave me like that, and I can't deny my feelings anymore.

Nagisa put aside all her hesitation, and was filled with strong love for Shizuma.

I feel so stupid for holding back, trying not to upset Kaori. It shouldn't have mattered in the first place. I like Shizuma-sama. That's all. Even if Shizuma-sama doesn't like me anymore, as long as I have feelings for her, I'll be happy just being by her side.

I was being selfish, Nagisa thought. But why did I feel that way? I should have believed in Shizuma-sama.

The door closed with a small sound. She left quietly so that Tamao wouldn't notice.

Nagisa fought excitement and hesitation all the way to Shizuma's room. The upperclassman's single person rooms lined the hallway on the top floor. It was a place underclassmen had to be most careful. Nagisa could bump into anyone at any moment, and she would have to explain herself.

Nagisa, hunched over, nervously walked down the hall. But because of the *Étoile* competition, there was not a soul in sight. She tiptoed across the deep green carpets that lined the hallway floor.

She finally made it to Shizuma's room.

Room No. 6001 S. Hanazono

Her name was in gold font on a green nameplate. Nagisa used her trembling hand to knock on the door. She rapped on it so softly that it barely made a sound. But there was no answer.

Oh no. Should I knock harder?

Nagisa shuddered with nervousness, but mustered enough courage to knock once more.

This time, it was too loud, and Nagisa became even more flustered.

Oh jeez...I knocked too hard...

Nagisa, scared, tried to flee. She took a few steps back, but the creak of another door opening in the hallway stopped her cold.

Room No. 6002 H. Togi

Hitomi and Mizuho peeked out from the doorway.

"Well, who is it? We're not attending the *Étoile* competition so I thought we told the room assistants not to visit our room today," Hitomi grumbled as she stepped out of the room. Her eyes widened when she saw Nagisa.

"Y-You're here! Why?"

Mizuho knew why Nagisa was here.

"Oh, I'm sorry... Shizuma-sama is already..."

Nagisa sensed the sadness in Mizuho's voice, and knew she was too late.

She's gone already.

Nagisa was in a daze, drained of energy. *I won't be able to see her again...*

ever. The person I love most, the strong, beautiful and glamorous queen who was so nice to me and loved me back. Hanazono Shizuma-sama is gone.

“I can’t believe this,” Hitomi snorted.” Why do two people who love each other have to be so stupid and split up?”

Mizuho was taken aback. “Hitomi?”

Hitomi shook her head. “I hate this situation. There are so many people in this world who love their partner so much, but can’t express it or have to leave them.”

Hitomi stood in front of Nagisa, who was about to crumble to her knees.

“Hey, you. Do you really love Shizuma-sama?” Hitomi asked, her voice cold.

“Yes,” Nagisa answered meekly.

“Really? Can you promise to make her happy?”

Nagisa gulped at the question.

Can I do that? Can I...make a person being sought after by royalty...happy? Am I allowed to give her happiness?

“Yes, I can.” Nagisa responded. “I love Shizuma-oneesama, so even if it seems I’m not capable of doing it, I will find a way. But only if Shizuma-oneesama forgives me.”

Nagisa clenched her hand so hard it shook.

Hitomi was satisfied with Nagisa’s honest answer and grinned.

“Good. If that’s what you think then I’ll help you! Right, Mizuho? We still have a chance to chase after Shizuma-sama!”

Hitomi turned to Mizuho, but Mizuho sadly shook her head.

“No, we won’t make it in time. Shizuma-sama is departing at 9 o’clock in a private jet.” She pointed to her watch. It was already 7:30 AM.

Ah... Nagisa froze.

“It’ll take at least two hours to get to the airport. I’m sorry,” Mizuho lamented.

Hitomi persisted. "It's a private jet, right? Then we can ask to delay its departure."

"Just because it's a privately owned aircraft doesn't mean it can do as it pleases. The runway scheduling is packed tight, so it will be difficult to adjust. And Shizuma-sama made the hard decision to study abroad, so it might be difficult to convince her."

"Silly, we have the ultimate weapon! We can overturn her 'hard decision!'"

"But..."

Hitomi lost patience with Mizuho's whimpers. "Okay already! Mizuho, don't you want Shizuma-sama to come back?! Didn't you say you'd be lonely if Shizuma-sama left?!"

"Well..."

"We've been friends with Shizuma-sama for thirteen years, and we only have nine months left until we graduate. This is our last chance to get Shizuma-sama back. We might not get another chance," Hitomi said in a serious tone.

Mizuho bit her lip. "So you're trying to manipulate Nagisa-chan to achieve your goals?"

Another voice, familiar to Nagisa, chimed in. A voice Nagisa instantly recognized.

Uh-oh.

Tamao-chan, who had always supported Nagisa no matter what...

"Tamao-chan..." *How did you know I was here?*

"Nagisa-chan, you shouldn't be fooled by these oneesama, you know? All they're trying to do is use you just to get Shizuma-oneesama back."

"What are you saying?"

Ignoring Hitomi's protests, Tamao, all dressed and ready to go, walked to Nagisa. She touched Nagisa's hair.

"Oh my, you ran out while I was taking a shower. Your hair's a mess. You can't go to Shizuma-oneesama looking like this." She stroked Nagisa's ponytail.

“Tamao-chan...”

Nagisa could barely speak, but she repeated Tamao’s name.

“Tamao-chan... Tamao-chan... Tamao-chan, Tamao-chan, Tamao-chan...”

She cried and hugged Tamao.

“There, there...you shouldn’t cry so much, especially before you go see your love, okay?”

Nagisa sniffed and silently nodded.

“Can I go?” Nagisa asked. She looked up from Tamao’s embrace, with tears streaming down her face.

“You love Shizuma-oneesama, right?” Tamao asked softly.

Nagisa answered without hesitation. “Yes.”

Tamao looked up as she continued to hug Nagisa. “You should have told me earlier, Nagisa-chan. What a fool you are.”

“I know, but...Tamao-chan... I...”Nagisa sobbed.

Tamao laughed. “I know what you’re trying to say. ‘But I like you as much as her,’ right?”

Hitomi burst out in laughter.

“Tamao-chan...” Nagisa looked like a sad, wet puppy.

“I have two more years until I reach Shizuma-oneesama’s age. If I’m even with her now, look out. I’m confident that you’ll like me more by then, Nagisa-chan.” Tamao giggled.

“Silly girl, Shizuma-sama will be an even more attractive university student by then,” joked Hitomi.

“Oh, you have it all wrong, Hitomi-oneesama. A high school student has more appeal than a college student because she can be in the same class and spend all her time with her love,” Tamao coolly shot back.

Nagisa’s tears dried up as she heard the two girls joking back and forth.

Thank you, Tamao-chan... And Togi-san and Kano-san, too.

“Tamao-oneesama! I put...the request through! It will land...on the school... grounds...in ten...minutes,” Chiyo yelled between gasps as she ran down the long hallway towards them.

“Oh, don’t yell like that. The neighbors will hear you.” Tamao covered her eyes.

“Land on the school grounds? Did you...?” Mizuho asked.

“Yes. I figured we didn’t have much time left, so I requested a helicopter. Just like Amane-sama did, of course.”

Tamao grinned.

Helicopter? Nagisa was dumbfounded.

“We’re... just in time...”

Chiyo, out of breath, stopped in front of Nagisa.

“Good thing Tamao-oneesama’s home is nearby! The Suzumi Resort Group’s company helicopter happened to be parked at home this morning.”

“Resort? Company helicopter?” Nagisa mumbled as Chiyo reported the outrageous details.

“Will I be able to see Shizuma-sama in time?”

Tamao grabbed the confused Nagisa and pushed her down the hall.

“Stop mumbling and start running!”

The other girls followed suit.

Shizuma sat near the window of the departure lobby of the large airport and stared outside. In the special lobby specifically reserved for the Hanazono clan, no visitors were admitted to bid farewell, so there were only a few staffers in black suits. She completed her check-in, and her luggage was loaded onto the small, silver plane parked in the distance. Shizuma could see it through the window.

It’s almost time. She placed her empty coffee cup on the window sill. *Ever since I entered junior high, I knew that I’d have to study abroad sooner or later.*

Studying in another country was part of a required education for a Hanazono, but for Shizuma, the timing of this trip served another purpose—to avoid a particular marriage proposal. In actuality, she was past due to complete her studies abroad. Shizuma looked at cargo and ladder vehicles running back and forth.

School life was enjoyable. I really wanted to stay there until I graduated.

Memories of Kaori flashed through her mind. *She was a good girl and left me with great memories. Yes, Kaori probably knew my true feelings. I loved Kaori. Not as a lover, but like a sister. When Kaori died, I was so sad and sorry for her. When I found out about Kaori's fatal condition, I didn't want to regret anything. I just wanted to cherish every moment that I spent with her, no matter how brief. The other students glorified our relationship as a tragic love story. But what Kaori and I experienced wasn't tragic; we made great memories. No matter how much I search in my heart, I don't regret a thing about Kaori.*

The one thing that remains is guilt. I felt helpless when Kaori passed, and guilty about not being able to love her as a lover. I really don't know what Kaori truly wanted from me. But now that I've left Nagisa, I realize that no matter how much time I spent with Kaori, I would have never fallen in love with her.

And when Kaori passed away, she left me behind and wished for my happiness...

Nagisa's face came to mind, and her heart ached. She shouldn't have given up on Nagisa, and properly expressed her feelings. But she couldn't do that, because she was afraid of hurting Nagisa again.

Nagisa had endured a tough life at Astrea, all because Shizuma had pursued her. Even though it wasn't Nagisa's fault, they had been relentless.

It was the first time Shizuma had experienced such agony. Up until now, Shizuma had taken whatever she wanted without hesitation. But that was no longer the case.

Now that I'm far away from her, Nagisa seems like a most precious, sparkling treasure to me. She has special qualities I don't have. She's pure, honest, energetic, and carefree. She would show her warm, soft, gentle glow only to me. And when I took Nagisa in my arms, I felt at peace, enveloped by her warmth.

Why? Shizuma asked herself. *Why is she the only one I want?*

Tears rolled from Shizuma's eyes, and she batted them away. *She probably wouldn't like me to be this weak.*

Strong gusts blew across the runway. Shizuma got out of the car that had transported her from the lobby to the runway, and walked toward the boarding ramp. She climbed to the top of the ramp and lowered her head to board the plane. The cabin attendant standing next to the door smiled.

"Bon voyage. Have a nice trip."

Shizuma repeated in her mind.

Bon voyage...Have a nice trip...The time has finally come...

With her heart broken and full of pain, Shizuma stepped into the plane.

"Shizuma-oneesama."

She heard an unbelievable voice in the distance.

A very familiar voice. Her heart burned and swelled at the irresistible sound. It was the voice of Shizuma's most adorable girl.

Her eyes opened wide, but she was afraid to turn around.

"Shizuma-oneesama...wait! Shizuma-oneesama!"

Is this real?

Shizuma froze in place, listening as the voice got closer. She turned around slowly. There was Nagisa, red-faced and full of tears, running toward her. Behind her were Tamao, Hitomi, Mizuho, and Chiyo, closing in.

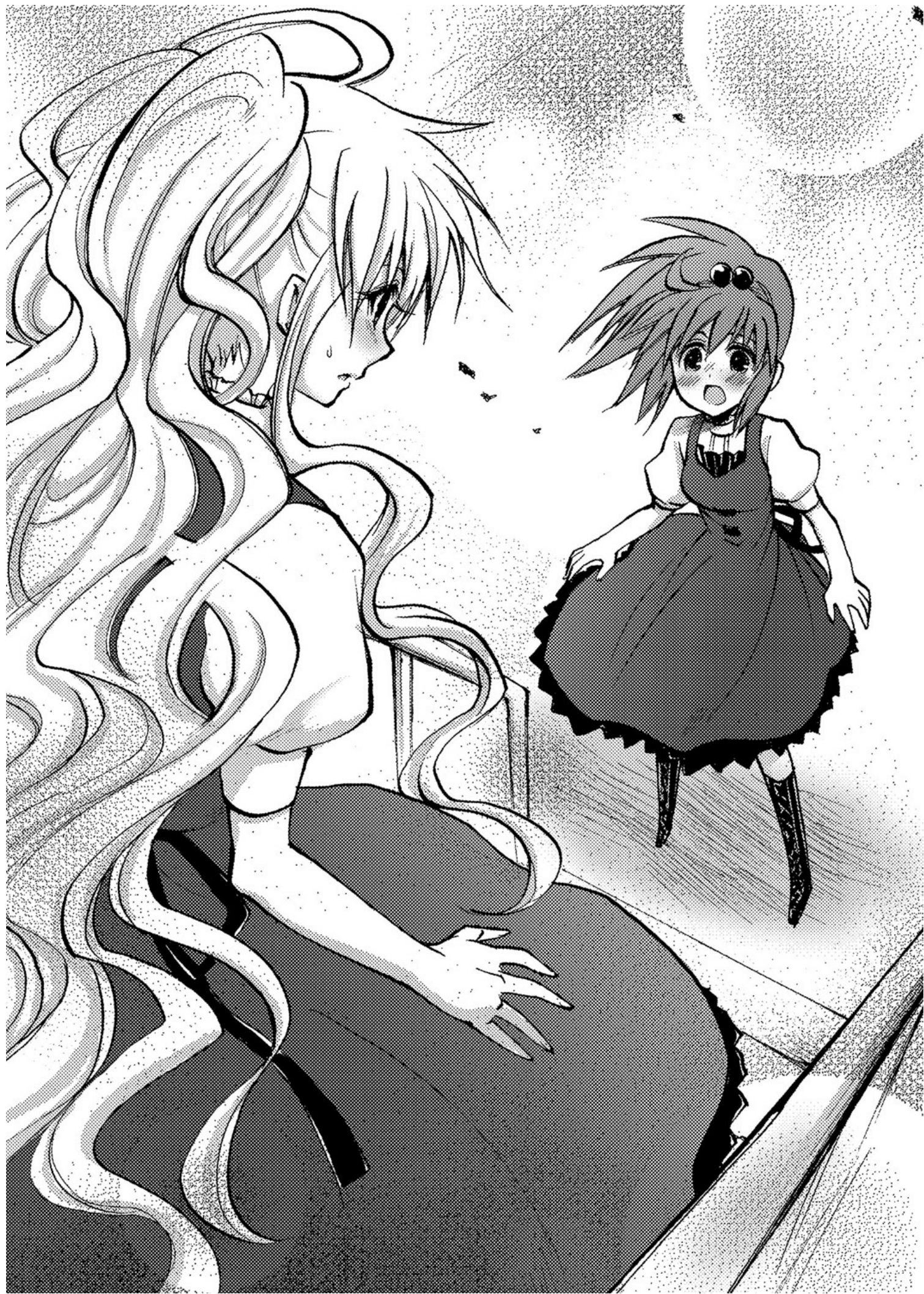
The girls screamed, "Shizuma-oneesama... Shizuma-sama"

"All of you." Shizuma had a lump in her throat.

Nagisa stopped at the bottom of the ramp.

"Shizuma-oneesama! I... I..."

Nagisa also had a lump in her throat. Her tears blurred her vision. “I...came for you!” she blurted.



Shizuma covered her mouth, trying to hold in her surprise. Without a word, she spread her trembling arms. *Come to me...*

Nagisa understood the silent message and darted up the ramp.

Oh...

Nagisa's tears—burning tears of joy—soaked Shizuma's chest.

"Shizuma-oneesama, it's not fair. You left me behind without even telling me. I...I...love you so much, Shizuma-oneesama."

Nagisa buried her face in Shizuma's chest.

Shizuma embraced Nagisa's warm tears and held her tight. *Oh, Nagisa. What a girl. You chased me all the way here. You make me so happy. I can be myself when you're with me. You're the only one in this world that I love.*

They hugged for a while, then Shizuma raised Nagisa's face. Nagisa tried to hide her teary face and runny nose, but Shizuma would not allow it.

"I'm not unfair. I will take responsibility, so don't move."

Nagisa's face turned beet red. Shizuma gently stroked Nagisa's cheek. Unlike her usual surprise attack, she pulled close to Nagisa's face like any lover would and kissed her on the lips. After a long, deep kiss...

"You're the first girl to scold me like that," Shizuma remarked as she walked down the ramp.

Epilogue

The Sacred *Étoile*

Ding dong...

Ding dong...

Ding dong...

The celebratory bells rang, and the girls' cheers resonated in the air. Astraea Hill was filled with happiness. At the edge of the lake was a large tent and numerous parasols with tables underneath them covering the area. There were bright hunter green one-piece dresses, white two-pieces suits with skirts, and soft, light pink plaid sailor outfits all about. The students of the three prim and proper schools of Astraea Hill—St. Miator Girls' Academy, St. Spica Girls' Institute, and St. Lulim Girls' School—mingled with each other enjoying tea and sweets.

Today was the annual Astraea Tea Party. The bells tolled to celebrate the crowning of the new *Étoile*. It echoed in the background, under the clear summer sky.

"Come to think of it... I should have taken you with me to Europe, huh?" Shizuma whispered into Nagisa's ear, which made her choke on a piece of chicken.

"Grrk...ack. Wh-What are you saying, Shizuma-sama! If you did that, then everyone would hate you." Nagisa remembered how she ran faster than Tamao, Chiyo, Hitomi, and Mizuho the day they had chased Shizuma to the airport.

"Goodness, you needn't get so mad. Think about it... maybe everyone would have congratulated us. This year's *Étoile* coronation is boring! I'd rather take you on a trip to Europe and have plenty of fun."

Rokujo Miyuki, a glass in one hand, interjected.

“Please engage in those activities after you graduate. Yes, why don’t you just marry Aoi-san then? A honeymoon in Europe sounds quite lovely, wouldn’t you say?”

Tomori Shion sat next to Miyuki and chuckled. “Please let us enjoy ourselves this year. You’ll have another shot at the *Étoile* crown next year, Shizuma-sama.”

“Next year?! I can’t possibly do that!” Shizuma blurted.

“Oh? Shizuma-sama, I thought for sure you’d be able to pull off a stunt like that for Aoi-san,” Yaya snickered.

Tamao, who sat next to Yaya, shook her finger. “Don’t worry. I, Suzumi Tamao, will not allow such a thing! Next year Nagisa-chan and I will win back the *Étoile* crown for Miator.”

Chiyo clasped her hands. “Wow, that’s wonderful, Tamao-oneesama.”

“Wait. Isn’t the *Étoile* couple supposed to be a pairing of an upperclassman and an underclassman?” Tsubomi questioned.

Chikaru chimed in.

“Good point. Maybe Nagisa-chan should transfer to Lulim instead? You’re one of the best stars around. Kizuna-chan, Remon-chan, and Kagome-chan are younger than you, so it’ll be perfect! Come on, everyone line up! Yes, you all look quite lovely!”

Kizuna, Remon, and Kagome scampered toward Nagisa and surrounded her.

“Yay, Chikaru-oneesama, we have one more student to join us in Class Z! ♥”

“Eh, ah, wait...hold on...” Nagisa stuttered.

“Oh, what a great idea! Maybe I should transfer to Lulim as well?” Shizuma commented.

Everyone laughed at her joke.

If we’re not careful, Shizuma-sama might just do that.

“By the way, where are they?” Momomi asked. “The winners of the competition?”

“Oh...they’re probably having their pictures taken right now, in their *Étoile* outfits,” Kaname answered bluntly.

One last bell.

Ding dong...

A celebratory bell rang its last note. The doors of the chapel were opened wide and the Prince and Princess came out. The blue summer sky was boundless, and the winds smelled sweet as flowers as it swept through the hills. The girls’ cheers grew louder as a flurry of white flower petals swirled in the air.

Flower petals slowly showered on all the young maidens, as though the heavens were cherishing this special moment. Time stopped briefly, while the girls’ dreams and loves were locked in eternity.

FIN

Translation Notes ¹ *Saltimbocca*: Marinated veal, chicken, or pork dish, topped with prosciutto and sage, popular in Switzerland, Italy, Spain and Greece (Italian).

² *Gâteau à l'ananas*: French pineapple cake (French).

³ *Poe's Clan* ("*Poe no Ichizoku*") was a historical shoujo manga published in 1972 to 1976 by renowned manga artist Moto Hagio about a family of vampires.

⁴ *Konpeito*: Japanese hard candy originally made in Portugal. Comes from the Portuguese word *confeito*, which means "sugar candy."

⁵ *Genpuku* is a coming-of-age ceremony for boys between the ages of 11-17.

⁶ *Mogi*: A female equivalent coming-of-age ceremony for girls between the ages of 12-14 for traditional samurai families. *Seijin shiki* is the modern day version of the coming-of-age ceremony for girls and boys who reach the age of 20.

⁷ Bosatsu: Bodhisattva, or "enlightened being" in the Buddhist religion. In this case, the most likely Bosatsu Mizuho resembled was the Japanese "Kannon Bosatsu" or "Goddess of Mercy."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sakurako Kimino *Place of Origin:* Tokyo *Blood type:* O

Familiar to many as the creator of *Sister Princess*, a sister moe title that became a sensation in the bishoujo realm. In this series, she writes a pure, traditional yuri story freely drawn from her own experiences in an all-girls school.

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